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富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 28

Potion Scramble

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Potion Scramble [Part 1]

The last of them collapsed to the ground. And this was before I, the hired guard, had even made a move.

"How trivial," the man in the white robe muttered nonchalantly. He dropped his weapon, a glass stirring rod, into his sleeve and lightly smoothed his silver hair, which had been ruffled by the wind. That was the end of the fight.

"Master, you were amazing!" The young girl in the white robe who had been frozen by my side cried out and dashed toward him as if launched from a spring. I say "girl," but she looked a bit older than me. Like the man, she was carrying a massive box on her back, which looked rather ill-suited for her.

"It was nothing, Hastis," the man said, ruffling her golden hair. He glanced at the fallen thugs. "They were mere ruffians. There was no need to trouble Miss Lina with the likes of them. Forget me, even you could have taken them, Hastis."

"No, I couldn't possibly..."

Lutavia, the man in the white robe, directed a gentle gaze at the blushing girl from behind his monocle. "You can do it. Haven't I always told you? Keep your heart as hot as a Boltamine oxidant, and your head as cool as a Melen disinfectant. Regulate your body as if strictly following the mixing ratio of a Tiltray chemical solution. If you remember that, you will be fine. After all, you are the Pharmaceutical Manager I've put my faith in. You shouldn't lose to people who have no knowledge of, let alone love for, medicine."

"...Yes!" adoring color filled her eyes as she looked up at him.

I decided to ignore the incomprehensible drug names popping up in their conversation. This job, guarding these two, or more accurately, guarding the contents of the boxes they carried, was the task I, Lina Inverse, had accepted.

There were things called "Magical Potions." This was a general term for various drugs used as mediums when sorcerers created magical items, performed ritual magic, or conducted experiments. Aside from eccentric traveling sorcerers like me, those immersed in research and experimentation often required these potions.

However, these potions weren't exactly easy to come by. For one, the price was absurdly high. While some were affordable, others were worth enough to allow someone to live in luxury for the rest of their life just by selling them at a bargain. Because raw materials were only found in specific regions, or the recipes were secret, or the management was difficult, they ended up being rare. Pharmaceutical Managers delivered them periodically or upon request, and their reliability was guaranteed. I'd heard orders even came from as far as Seirune or Lyzelle.

As I mentioned, these potions were basically incredibly expensive. This meant ruffians and bandits targeted them during transport. Consequently, the Association usually hired guards, and the request came to me while I was staying in Kinnal City. This city's Mage Association was a major hub for these potions, boasting four large warehouses, numerous manufacturing facilities, and dozens of Managers. The job would take several days, but the pay was exceptional, and I figured learning about potions would be good for my studies, so I had to take it.

And so, I set out with the two Managers, Lutavia-san and Hastis, shortly after noon. We had barely started walking and Kinnal City was just about to vanish behind the trees when three thugs appeared. Lutavia-san had taken them down in an instant.

He looked like a handsome man in his mid-twenties, but based on his speech and the Council President's attitude toward him, he was likely older. He glanced at the fallen men. "Probably just local thugs. I feel like I've seen them before. They likely saw us and attacked for money."

"They didn't know that Pharmaceutical Managers learn self-defense," Hastis added cheerfully.

Well, usually people wouldn't know that. Even I, a sorcerer, didn't know until just now. Besides, the way Lutavia-san took them down seemed to go far beyond "self-defense."

"Setting them aside... more importantly," Lutavia-san said, suddenly turning a sharp gaze toward me. "Miss Lina, you're carrying several magical potions, aren't you?"

"Eh...!" I was at a loss for words. I did have some potions. Not that I intended to use them; it was for asset management. Carrying treasure confiscated from bandits in the form of coins was heavy and bulky. Instead, I bought expensive potions and magic items that were easier to carry. But I didn't recall mentioning I had any.

To my bewildered face, Hastis simply said: "I can tell by the smell."

"You can tell?!"

"It's love!" she declared. "But Miss Lina, judging by the scent, you seem to be holding medicines that are resistant to heat changes. Of course, they are yours, so I know we shouldn't interfere... but their storage condition is, frankly, not good. As someone who loves medicine, there are things I simply cannot overlook."

Was I imagining it, or did the color of their eyes change? In fact, wasn't their breathing getting a bit heavy?

"If you'd like, at least for the duration of this trip, we could manage your medicine along with ours..."

"I'll pass." I declined flatly.

The two of them froze for a second, then dropped their shoulders with a sigh that seemed bottomless.

"...If you say so..." Lutavia-san nodded with a troubled expression. "Though, if one has love for magical potions, such care should be natural!"

"Love?!" I shouted.

Lutavia-san and Hastis began speaking to each other alternately.

"It can't be helped, can it..."

"Yeah... but the medicine is so pitiful in that state..."

"Master, I feel like I can hear the medicine crying, saying it's so hot..."

"I can hear it too. Clearly."

The two of them turned resentful gazes toward me simultaneously.

"So pitiful..."

"So tragic..."

"SHUT UP! Anyway! Let's hurry!"

With those unpleasant stares at my back, I started walking down the highway again.

"It can't be helped, can it..."

"Yeah... but with that kind of management, the magical potions are so pitiful..."

"Master, I feel like I can hear the magical potions crying, saying it's so hot, so hot..."

"I can hear it too. Quite clearly."

The two of them turned their resentful glares toward me at the same time and let out a heavy sigh.

"How pitiful..."

"So tragic..."

"SHUT UP! Anyway! Let's just hurry up!"

With those unpleasant stares at my back, I started walking down the highway again.

That day, our group took lodgings in a certain village well before the sun began to set. I felt like we could have pushed on to the next town, but Lutavia and Hastis started saying we should stop because they had to manage the magical potions.

There were two rooms. One was for me and Hastis, and the other was for Lutavia. The two of them immediately started tending to the medicine in Lutavia's room. I was told I could do as I pleased, but I ended up deciding to watch their work.

To block out the sunlight, Lutavia closed the windows and created several magical lights with low intensity near the ceiling. Of course, these two were sorcerers as well as Pharmaceutical Managers. They were presumably capable of using all the spells necessary for their work. They said they created several weak lights instead of one bright one to avoid casting shadows over their hands while they worked.

Whether it was a lesson for Hastis or an explanation for me, Lutavia proceeded with the work while explaining each step. To lower the temperature, he created a pillar of ice in a corner of the room with a spell. The two of them put on masks made from handkerchiefs, lowered their carrying boxes to the floor, and released about six locks.

When the back panel of the box was removed, three tiers of drawers were revealed. Opening the top drawer, I saw rows of medicine bottles of various sizes, colors, and shapes sitting in something that looked like murky water. When the two reached in, the "water" dipped away. That was when I first realized that the drawer was filled not

with water, but with some kind of jelly-like substance. It probably served as both a thermal insulator and a shock absorber.

They took out some bottles, opened the lids, stirred the contents with a rod, closed them again, and embedded them back into the jelly. Other bottles were left as they were. The displaced jelly eventually settled back into a smooth surface like a quiet lake. Once they finished one drawer, they closed it and moved to the next. They continued this tedious work in silence until all the drawers were done.

Next, Lutavia slid the top panel of the box and pulled out long metal cylinders from the four corners of a double-layered top. He pulled out all the tubes and removed the cork lids, revealing they were filled with a transparent liquid.

"Given the season and the time until morning, three should do."

"Yes."

After that brief exchange, the two placed their hands on the tubes and chanted a spell.

"Rayfreeze!"

The cooling spell froze the liquid inside. I see. I at least knew that many magical potions required temperature management. These tubes, which ran through the carrying box from top to bottom, were used to adjust the internal temperature.

"There. All done." Lutavia declared the completion of the work with a smile.

"So... you're taking the boxes with you?" I muttered casually.

"WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?!" Once again, they shouted in unison, then took turns speaking.

"The medicine would be sad if we didn’t!"

"They're alive!"

"They'll cry because they're lonely!"

The moment I suggested that we go have some tea and talk about medicine, their eyes sparkled and they turned toward me.

"We understand!"

"In that case!"

They answered eagerly and began putting their boxes back on.

"Never leave them during transport!"

"What if a burglar stole them while we were gone?!"

"Leaving medicine alone in a room is unthinkable!"

"well... I really don't think they'd cry, though..." I interjected.

To my retort, Hastis narrowed her eyes and snapped, "I'm the one who would be lonely and cry if I were separated from my medicine!"

Oh. I see.

"Besides, if there’s no medicine nearby, don't you just get all fidgety?!"

"No, well, that sounds like you're just an anxious person..."

"That’s not true! Right, Master?"

To her request for agreement, Lutavia gave a wry smile.

"Hastis, you are still a bit naive in that regard. Normally, one carries some chemicals for private use separately from the delivery stock. I always have about ten such bottles on me. That way, even after delivering all the stock, my fingers don't tremble from the anxiety of being away from medicine."

"I see! As expected of the Master!" Hastis looked at her master with glittering, admiring eyes.

I brushed aside the scary thought that these two might actually be suffering from some weird addiction symptoms.

"Well... let's hear about those... habits... I mean, customs, while we eat."

I figured learning about magical potions would be good for my studies.

Or so I thought, but I was already regretting it. I began to wonder if I had made a mistake by asking these two to talk about medicine. I was definitely wrong.

"Miss Lina, which do you prefer: preservative solution or disinfectant?"

We had entered a small eatery and ordered drinks, and this was the very first thing Hastis blurted out.

"Uh... well... do I have to pick one?"

To my bewildered mutter, she nodded with eyes that held not a shred of doubt. Incidentally, because their boxes hit the back of the chairs, the two were sitting sideways. It was clearly normal for them. They didn't care at all about the curious stares from other customers.

"I understand why you're hesitant," Lutavia said with a wry smile, seeing my distress. "Both are irreplaceable. Asking to choose just one is indeed a difficult request."

(No, to me, they're both equally irrelevant.)

"But Master, we have to make this clear, or the flow of the conversation later will change."

"That's true."

So the flow changed. The two turned to me and asked in unison, "So, which is it?"

"Uh... well..." I thought for a moment, trying not to provoke them. "Instead of such... obsessive... I mean, deep topics, I'd rather talk about things like whether you use fire-based attack spells, and if the heat affects the medicine."

"WHAT?! You're starting from there?!" They cried out in shock.

I see. For them, that was old news. Feeling their judgmental glares, I waved my hands dismissively.

"No, I mean, of course I'm a sorcerer of sorts, so I know the basics about magical potions. But I haven't been told exactly what kind of potions you're carrying or how many. As your guard, I should know the bare minimum. It would be bad if I accidentally used an incompatible spell and ruined the medicine because I didn't know its characteristics, right?"

I desperately tried to cover for myself. Their expressions softened.

"I see. That makes sense."

"It certainly would be a problem if the medicine were ruined by something like that."

"Well, generally, the average stable temperature for magical potions is sixteen degrees, with twenty-three percent humidity. But of course, that's just an average. Some children are extremely sensitive to heat."

"Children?"

"Oh, I mean the magical potions, of course. But those high-maintenance children can be the most precious."

As she spoke gleefully, Lutavia raised an eyebrow.

"Wait, Hastis. I can't let that slide. Every magical potion is equally dear. It isn't right to rank these lovely children based on your personal preference."

Hastis looked troubled. "No, I don't mean to give any of them special treatment. I just meant they're cute in that way..."

"That's exactly the point, Hastis! Differences in preference can unconsciously lead to differences in handling! By over-focusing on a difficult child, you might neglect the others!"

"I'm not saying don't care for them, I'm saying don't care too much! Saying this one is cuter is a breeding ground for favoritism!"

"But it's impossible to kill your feelings! You're bound to have favorites!"

"Then you should pour that love and interest equally into all potions!"

"I understand that, but..."

I had a feeling this would happen. Leaving me completely behind, Lutavia and Hastis continued their passionate debate about magical potions long into the night.

Our group came to a halt in the middle of the road the next morning. We had left the village and hadn't gone far when we reached a spot where thick trees lined both sides, a perfect place for an ambush. I stopped because I sensed someone hiding

nearby. Likely bandits. However, before I could issue a warning, Lutavia and Hastis had also stopped.

Hastis stared intensely at a patch of trees. "The smell of magical potions... why here?"

Lutavia followed suit. "This scent... Leyless Reagent."

You stopped because of the smell?! I sniffed the air myself, but I couldn't smell anything chemical. Still, for these potion-maniacs, it wasn't surprising they could catch a scent faint enough to escape a normal person. But why would an ambusher smell like medicine? Well, I could just beat them up and ask questions later.

"It's no use hiding! I know you're there!" I shouted.

At that moment, the brush rustled, and a dozen men appeared. They looked like typical mountain bandits, but one man among them stood out. He looked to be in his mid-twenties. He wore armor and carried a sword like the others, but his gear looked strangely new. He was clearly someone trying to pass as a bandit.

"The boxes on your backs... those are magical potions, right?" The fake bandit leader called out. "I'm sorry, but could you leave them here? If you do, I won't take your lives..."

The man cut himself off and leaped back. "Scatter! There's a sorcerer!"

Tch! He noticed I was casting! But the others were a second too slow. My spell was complete.

"Dill Brand!"

A mass of high-pressure air blasted five of the grouped men away. The remaining bandits flinched for a moment.

"Damn it!" one of them yelled, drawing his sword and rushing forward. His target wasn't me, but Hastis.

Lutavia stepped in front of the frozen Hastis to protect her. As the thug charged, Lutavia kicked off the ground. A glass stirring rod gleamed in his right hand.

"Gubuh?!"

The thug let out a cry and was sent flying, performing a half-backflip in mid-air. He crumpled to the ground, writhing in pain. It was the exact same sight I had witnessed on the first day.

"Wha... what was that?!" another bandit stammered in shock. "He didn't even touch him!"

Lutavia held the stirring rod at shoulder height.

"A pharmaceutical stirring rod. To a normal person, it is just a stick. But once in the hands of us Pharmaceutical Managers, it becomes an entity that stirs all things! In short! There is nothing this rod cannot stir!"

"What are you talking about?!"

"It's quite simple," Lutavia said, looking down at the man he had just defeated. "At the moment of contact, I stirred the forces that move his muscles and internal organs through his armor and clothes."

"I am telling you," the man raised his voice again. "If you have no intention of letting us go, then we will have to stop worrying about our profits and..."

He cut himself off. Right now, this man was being blown away by his own power and suffering by his own power.

"That... that is an absurd story..."

"If you find it hard to believe, then please, come forward. You will understand once you experience it with your own body."

The ruffian was speechless at that invitation.

"This is as far as we go," the man declared. He was the leader who had already partially hidden himself in the shade of the trees. "If we receive any more attacks, I will have to order my men to target the boxes on your backs."

So that was his game.

Hastis let out a small groan, and then Lutavia-san sighed.

"That... is not very pleasant, but it seems we have no choice but to accept, Miss Lina."

Keeping my spell ready, I gave a silent, small nod. It probably was not impossible to defeat all the remaining enemies while protecting the medicine. It was not impossible, but it was not a task that could be done easily.

Our objective was, first and foremost, the transport of the magical potions. If we defeated the ruffians but the medicine was destroyed along with the boxes, the whole thing would be pointless. Ultimately, the three of us kept the thugs at bay while we continued down the highway.

Birds were chirping peacefully.

We had not gone far from the site of the ambush when the tension in the air finally dissipated.

"Who were those people, I wonder?" Hastis asked quietly in the middle of the tranquil atmosphere.

"I think they were bandits... right?" Lutavia-san replied, as if stating the obvious.

"I know that, but... I wonder why I smelled magical potions on them."

"It is because their leader is a sorcerer," I said matter-of-factly.

The two turned startled gazes toward me.

"But his appearance..."

I shook my head at Lutavia-san's mutter. "Appearance can be changed easily. If you really smelled something, and if the opponent was just a common thief who knew magical potions were worth money, they would only be interested in the price, not the contents. Even if they stole the medicine, they probably would not even open the lids. In other words, it is almost impossible for the scent of the medicine to soak into them. But what if it were a sorcerer?"

I continued my theory. "They steal the medicine, keep what they can use for themselves, and sell the rest for research funds. In that case, it would not be strange for the scent of the medicine to be all over their body. It is unfortunately quite common for sorcerers to side with villains."

Hastis made a serious face at my theory. "Now that you mention it... as soon as they were at a disadvantage, they threatened to break the medicine. That means they truly understood what we value the most, right?"

"I would hate to think it was a fellow sorcerer," Lutavia-san added, his expression clouding over.

"Anyway, be careful," I said, looking at the two of them. "It means there is a possibility that the opponent is a sorcerer and might come after us persistently."

The two looked at each other in silence at my point.

The air in the room was chilly, and even after getting into bed, a single thin blanket left me feeling a bit cold.

"...Hastis, are you still awake?"

"I'm awake," her voice came from the next bed.

It was night in our room at the inn. I was sharing a room on the third floor with Hastis, while Lutavia-san was in the room next door. We were scheduled to reach our first delivery destination tomorrow. I wanted to sleep soundly to save up my energy, but because of the chilliness, I could not fall asleep easily.

"Can't we do something about this cold?"

"We cannot."

The answer came back without a hint of compromise.

While the magical light, dimmed to a low intensity, illuminated the area faintly, the source of the cold sat right in the middle of the room, sparkling in that pale glow. It was, of course, the large pillar of ice Hastis had created with a spell for the temperature management of the magical potions.

There had been a spare blanket in the room last night, and the ice pillar had been in that room too, but the place we stayed tonight only had one thin blanket per person. Under normal circumstances, one would be enough, but at this temperature, it was a bit rough.

"But... if I catch a cold from this, it will affect tomorrow."

"A cold can be cured eventually, but once magical potions have altered their quality, they never go back. Please do not suggest that we simply melt the ice."

"Yes, well... that is true... but if we get attacked by guys like the ones today while our physical condition is poor and the medicine gets taken, that would be a problem too, right?"

"That would certainly be a problem, but... is there any other solution?"

"Hastis, did you hear something from the next room just now?"

"Eh? You mean Master's room?"

We both shut our mouths and listened. I sat in silent thought for a moment. Then, I whispered, "I'm going to go look."

I raised my body up on the bed.

"No, really... wasn't it just the sound of him tossing and turning and hitting the wall or something?"

THUD!

The roar that echoed at that moment definitely came from Lutavia-san's room. Something had happened after all!

"Maybe. But since I've been asked to be the guard, I have to act in case of an emergency. You stay here."

I spoke as I put on my boots. I was not wearing pajamas but the same clothes I wore during the day. I had been sleeping in this outfit to ward off the cold rather than to prepare for a night attack. Leaving my cloak and shoulder guards behind, I picked up only my short sword and headed toward the door, killing my footsteps. There was no sign of anyone around. The only sound had been the noise from earlier. There was a possibility it was just my imagination, but I was still concerned.

I opened the door and peeked out. The empty hallway was lit by a lamp. I lunged for the doorknob of his room, but it was locked.

"Lutavia-san!"

"Li... Lina-san...!" Lutavia-san's flustered voice answered my call.

"What happened? Open the door!"

"Well... it was so sudden... w-wait a moment, I am coming toward the door now..."

His response was incoherent, and for some reason, he was fumbling around strangely. I lost my patience and quickly chanted a spell.

"Damu Brass!"

I blew the lock off the door with the shockwave spell and rushed into the room.

"Whoa!"

I managed to support myself by grabbing the door and the frame with both hands. In the spot where I had jumped, there was no floor. A huge hole had been opened right in the middle of the room's floor. Parts of the floor remained near the walls and around the bed, and Lutavia-san was standing near the bed with a look of dismay on his face. I see. It was no wonder he couldn’t get to the door easily.

When I peered into the hole, I saw the room below. A lamp was lit, but no one was there; countless pieces of wood were scattered on the floor. This was...

"Lutavia-san! Where is the medicine box?"

"...Ah..." At my question, he looked around frantically and then turned a stunned gaze toward me. "...I placed it in the middle of the room..."

I knew it! Someone had taken the room directly below, broken through the ceiling—which was the floor of this room—and dropped the carrying box with the medicine into their hands.

I had no proof, but the face that flashed through my mind at that moment was the man from the fake bandits we met today! If I let them escape now, the medicine would probably be gone forever.

"I'm going after them! Lutavia-san, stay with Hastis!"

Leaving him with those words without waiting for a reply, I jumped through the hole into the room below!

(Potion Scramble: To be continued!)

Potion Scramble [Part 2]

The room was filled with wind. A window was open. This was the second floor, but it was not a height one could not jump down from. The opponent had taken the medicine box from Lutavia-san and escaped through the window. I ran to look, but it was a city night outside. There was no sign of anyone carrying a medicine box.

Logically, that was the most likely explanation. But my intuition said otherwise. Believing my gut, I leaped out into the hallway while chanting a spell under my breath. I turned toward the neighboring door.

"Damu Brass!"

With a single strike, I smashed the door and rushed inside. In the room, which had no lights on, there was a single figure standing there holding the stolen medicine box! My prediction was a direct hit!

They had taken the room directly below us, punched through the floor, and plundered the goods. I did not believe an opponent capable of such a feat would simply escape out the window while lugging the heavy medicine box. So, what would they do? They would make me think they fled, then hide and wait for the pursuer—namely, me—to pass by. And if they were to hide, it would be in the room directly beneath me and Hastis. My read was a direct hit!

"Wha..!"

The man let out a cry of shock. It was dark, so I could not see clearly, but he was likely one of the guys who attacked us this morning. The man hurled the medicine box toward me! He had tried various tricks, but this was the end of the line! I lunged straight at the man.

But at that moment! I instinctively caught the box in mid-air! It was heavy!

During the split second I spent catching it and stumbling, the man spun on his heel and dashed. He leaped out the window! A moment later, I heard the sound of a

landing. While chanting a spell, I ran to the window. Looking down, I saw a single shadow racing away through the night street, where onlookers were starting to peek out.

I wanted to end it here, but even if I fired an attack spell now, I would probably miss. On top of that, it was a bad move to chase him while carrying the heavy medicine box, or even to leave the box behind to pursue him. In short, the opponent had handed me the weight of the medicine box to seal my movement. I had no choice but to give up the pursuit.

But this meant there would be another attack eventually. I let out a sigh and returned to the room where Lutavia and Hastis were waiting.

The next day, after the attack. We left the inn and arrived at the town of Ampala, the first of the four delivery destinations, without further incident. We handed the medicine to the client, received payment, and entered this eatery to have lunch. However, the expressions of Lutavia and Hastis as they sat at the table were incredibly grim.

"What's wrong? You seem down," I said, stuffing my mouth with a bite of duck steamed with herbs. The sauce and the meat mingled, spreading deliciousness throughout my mouth. I should think about this later... but since it was for work, I decided I would make Lutavia pay for the repair of the door I broke as an expense.

Humans are happy when food is good, especially after a milestone in their work. The duck meat, so tender it didn't even need a knife, fell apart the moment it entered my mouth.

Hastis, with a gloomy face, slowly moved her food to her mouth. "The cause is that sorcerer we just delivered the medicine to."

Lutavia added, poking at the side of corn with the tip of his fork. "That sorcerer just now?"

I tried to recall the man. He was a middle-aged sorcerer belonging to the Association, with various books and experimental tools scattered around his room. He seemed like the very common researcher-type sorcerer you would find at any Association. His conduct during the trade was normal. He didn't seem like someone with a nasty personality.

"That person..." Lutavia muttered.

"He lacks love for medicine!" Hastis snapped.

"That's it?" I asked.

"When we handed over the medicine, we gave him all sorts of advice regarding its management, but he said, 'I'll use it soon, so I don't care about that'..."

Hastis covered her mouth and stifled a sob. Lutavia dropped his hands to the table, looking like he was about to weep as well. He raised his head with teary eyes and slammed the table.

"I am delivering these medicines with the feeling of a father marrying off his daughter! And he says that!"

"That man... he only sees magical potions as tools! *Ugh*...!"

They were crying. These guys were unbelievable.

"Hey, hey, hey. Calm down, be calm. Magical potions *are* tools."

At my attempt to persuade them, Lutavia hit the table again.

"It's a matter of the heart!"

"A daughter, really?!" I backed away as Hastis began to tremble, holding her fork.

"Of course... I know that magical potions are tools. I know they don't belong to us, and I know I can't complain if I'm told not to interfere. But! We have spent so much effort managing these medicines, so I want them to be treated with care!"

"I see..."

I didn't understand their feelings at all, but for these two potion-maniacs, it was clearly unbearable to see medicine they had managed with meticulous care be treated so casually.

"B-but look, that's not something that just started today, right?"

"That's the point!" Hastis raised her face with determination. "Lina, you saw it too, didn't you?! How sloppy the management of the chemical shelf in that room was!"

"That's exactly why it is so frustrating!" Lutavia added. "Having to see those children treated so carelessly over and over again, and yet being powerless to do anything about it..."

"Master... will we have to keep feeling this way forever?"

"Endure it for now, Hastis. There is no night that does not end, and no rain that does not stop. Someday, surely... a world will come where people and magical potions can live in peace, hand in hand! Believe that!"

No, such a world is never coming.

Yet, for some reason, Hastis was moved by his words and clung to Lutavia.

"Master!"

"Hastis!"

As I watched the strange master-and-student embrace across the table, I did my best to look like a stranger while I continued my meal.

That night, after completing the first delivery, we were at an inn in a town a little further down the road. In the darkness, I silently sat up halfway in bed.

"Is something wrong, Lina-san?" Hastis turned her face toward me from under her covers. She was still awake.

As always, Lutavia was in the room next door. In our room, a pillar of ice stood for the temperature management of the medicine.

I whispered back. "I heard a noise next door."

"Does that mean—!"

She gasped, and I nodded in silence. It brought back memories of the attack the previous night. Of course, tonight I had specifically chosen a place where the room below was occupied. It was unlikely the opponent would use the same trick. However, it would be pointless if I were outsmarted because I assumed it was just my imagination. I was bothered by it, and I wanted to follow the footsteps.

"I'm going to go look. You stay here."

I said the same thing as yesterday, took only my short sword, and killed my footsteps as I headed for the door. I reached for the doorknob of Lutavia's room and stopped. I heard the sound of a door opening. Footsteps followed, passing in front of my room and heading down the stairs.

That was the sound of someone leaving Lutavia's room and going downstairs. Surely Lutavia wouldn't be going for a night stroll in this situation. I waited for the sound to fade, then opened my door and slipped into the hallway without a sound.

The inn was a standard setup: a tavern and dining room on the first floor, with guest rooms on the second floor and above. I headed downstairs.

The shop on the first floor was still open, with two or three customers scattered about, but Lutavia was nowhere to be seen. I peeked out the front door.

In the night town, I caught a glimpse of a figure disappearing around the corner of a street away from the inn. The moonlight illuminated silver hair and a white robe. He wasn't carrying the medicine box, but... it was Lutavia?

I left the inn and followed. Just as I turned the same corner where the white shadow had vanished, I heard voices.

"...The first delivery is over. What are we going to do!"

The voice, dripping with impatience, undoubtedly belonged to Lutavia. And then:

"It can't be helped. It was unexpected that the guard would go that far. Both for me and for you."

The voice I heard belonged to the attacker!

I slowly moved forward.

"Maybe it is better to call it off this time."

"But then—!"

In a place just off the main street, a figure was standing in the darkness.

"What’s the plan?" I asked.

At the sound of my voice, the two spun around. It was the leader of the attackers and Lutavia.

"Lina...san...?"

Lutavia let out a raspy voice. I spoke nonchalantly to him.

"I thought something was strange since last night. How they knew where our inn was and which room we were staying in. Where the medicine box was placed in the room. Without knowing at least that much, last night's attack wouldn't have worked. There was a high probability that information was leaking. In other words, there was an insider."

"You think it's me?" Lutavia asked.

I nodded silently. That was a lie, though. While it was true I thought the opponent's handling was too skillful, the rest was just something I had just made up on the spot. But a bluff is sometimes necessary in life.

"Hastis is going to cry."

"I suppose she will..." Lutavia said.

He pulled a glass stirring rod from his robe. I see... his resolve was firm. Then I had no choice. I began to chant a spell under my breath.

"We are retreating, Regel," Lutavia declared, his stirring rod still pointed at me, before I could finish my spell.

"It would be easier to settle this here—" the man named Regel started.

"She is not an opponent who can be defeated easily," Lutavia interrupted him. "If the fight drags on, the guards will come. If that happens, we will be at a disadvantage."

He backed away slowly.

"Tch!" Regel clicked his tongue once, spun on his heel, and ran. Lutavia followed suit a moment later.

"Freeze Arrow!"

I immediately released my spell. A dozen arrows of cold air closed in on the white figure. At that moment, Lutavia looked back!

The glass stirring rod in his hand glinted in the moonlight. In the next instant, almost all the arrows of cold air I had fired were scattered in every direction! He had stirred the air to create a wind, diverting the incoming attack. Once again, he turned and ran after Regel!

I didn't chase them; I simply turned back. There were two of them. If I forced a pursuit and they split up, one would get away. In the worst-case scenario, I could lose them and they might double back to Hastis, who knew nothing of the situation, and take the medicine. They would likely come back on their own anyway. There was no need to chase them now. The final battle would probably be tomorrow.

But before that, I had one depressing job to do.

"That's a lie!"

After hearing my story, Hastis spoke with tears welling in her eyes. I had returned to the inn, recovered the medicine box Lutavia had left behind, and returned to Hastis's room to explain what had happened. Her reaction was exactly as I had expected.

"Master... Master was in league with thieves?! That's a lie! It must be some mistake! I mean, Master was fighting the thieves, wasn't he!"

"To make us trust him," I said, cutting her words short. It seemed cruel, but now she had to accept the truth. Comforting words were unnecessary.

"But... but..." She looked at me with a pleading gaze. "If that were true, Master wouldn't have left the medicine box in his room! He could have just taken it and run!"

"His outing tonight was just a meeting for future strategy. I actually heard them talking about whether to continue the plan or call it off and wait for the next opportunity. Since it was just a meeting, there was no point in bringing the medicine box."

They likely intended to get both medicine boxes. After stealing one last night, Lutavia would probably have made up some excuse to take the remaining box and run. But that plan had collapsed.

Hastis looked down, her nails digging into her knees.

The tears wetting her cheeks—were they from sorrow, or anger, or regret? "How could this... why..."

"I don't know the reason," I said, my eyes fixed blankly on the pillar of ice that shimmered faintly in the magical light. "He didn't look like the kind of person who would do this for money to me, either. But regardless of his motives, we have to accept the fact that he's no longer on our side."

"..."

"Tomorrow, let's head back to the town of Ampala for now. We'll use the Vision Room at the Mage Association to report to the Kinnal Association and ask for instructions."

The Vision Room, by the way, was a facility found in most Mage Associations used for long-distance communication via ritual magic.

At my suggestion, Hastis remained silent for a moment before she spoke quietly—but clearly. "No."

"Let's keep going," she said without hesitation. "If we need a Vision Room, we can use the one in the next town's Association."

"Keep going? You mean just the two of us?"

She nodded firmly. Returning to Ampala would take half a day. If we kept going, it would take a day and a half to reach the town with the Association. It was obvious which path was safer.

However, I understood her feelings. Her trust in Lutavia was far greater than her trust in me. Lutavia had vanished, and I was the one telling her "he betrayed us." Though she didn't say it aloud, Hastis was likely considering the possibility that I had done something to Lutavia and was lying about it.

If I tried to persuade her too strongly now, it would only breed unnecessary suspicion.

"If that's your judgment, I'll follow it," I said, nodding. No matter which path we chose, tomorrow would likely be the day of the final battle.

A small bird took flight from the forest trees. Passing travelers moved to the edge of the road, casting wary glances at us from a distance.

The next day had dawned. Hastis and I had left the town and begun making our way down the highway. But a problem had arisen: the carrying boxes for the medicine.

If I carried one on my back, it would get in the way if I suddenly had to respond to an emergency. On the other hand, it was impossible for Hastis to carry two. So, in the end, Hastis carried one as usual, and I had my magically created clay Golem carry the other.

The golem I made was lanky, about two heads taller than an average adult male, and naturally, its color and material were just dirt. To give it better reach, its legs were strangely long.

Having a thing that looked like a twilight shadow following two girls around was quite a sight. It was only natural that the people we passed gave us strange looks.

How far had we walked since leaving town?

"Do you think... he'll come?"

Hastis, who had been silent the whole time, finally whispered this as the foot traffic around us died down.

"Probably," I replied. I was talking about Lutavia and his group, of course. They didn't have much time to spare. Once news of his desertion reached the Mage Association, it would become difficult for them to move. They would either have to steal the medicine before that happened or silence us. Either way, they wouldn't just stay quiet. This time, they wouldn't be able to just retreat if things went south.

Hastis and I came to a halt not long after that conversation. The golem, which had been ordered to follow me, stopped as well. The reason for stopping went without saying. From the trees and undergrowth lining the road, several presences were radiating a heavy pressure.

Hastis likely didn't sense them through presence alone, but rather caught a faint scent of magical potions that a normal person wouldn't notice.

"That was surprisingly fast."

"I thought you two would decide to move forward," Lutavia said, stepping slowly from the shadow of the trees ahead. He wore the same clothes and the same expression as yesterday, as if he knew his surprise attack had been anticipated. His monocle glinted

in the sunlight. The only difference was that the box was missing from his back, and he was no longer an ally.

In an instant, Regel and more than ten ruffians appeared from all directions, completely surrounding us.

At that moment, the flicker of hope Hastis had been harboring, that this was all some kind of mistake, was crushed. However, she didn't fly into a rage. Instead, she let out a slender sigh.

"Why, Master?"

To her quiet question, Lutavia replied just as calmly, "You should understand, Hastis."

He approached her slowly. "Yesterday, when we delivered the magical potion to the client and saw it being treated so carelessly—you were frustrated, weren't you? You were sad. We have tasted that same feeling hundreds, thousands of times... and as long as we continue like this, we will taste it hundreds, thousands of times more. I simply couldn't endure it any longer."

He stopped, keeping a slight distance from Hastis.

"Even so, what good does it do to steal the medicine?" she asked, looking him straight in the eye.

But he remained entirely unmoved. "I want you to understand. This is not 'theft,' it is 'protection.' There are many people who love medicine as much as we do. For example..."

He pointed toward Regel. "He was a Pharmaceutical Manager at the Kinnal City Mage Association, just like us. But because he loved medicine so much, he got into trouble with a client and had to leave the Association."

"That's a lie," Hastis denied his explanation immediately. She sent a sharp gaze toward Regel. "When this man attacked us, he threatened to destroy the medicine box on my back if we fought any longer. Someone who truly loves magical potions could never say such a thing."

"Even for me... that was an agonizing decision," Regel said with a bitter expression. "But if I hadn't said that, the plan, no, our very ideals, might have collapsed."

"Ideals?"

As I repeated the word, Lutavia nodded deeply as if I had taken the words right out of his mouth. "Yes, ideals! Everyone here, starting with Regel, are pharmacists, herbalists, medicine peddlers... people whose jobs are ordinary but who simply love medicine! A collection of veterans who start to tremble if they go a day without the smell of chemicals!"

What kind of group was this? From their looks alone, they were just typical thugs.

"They don't look like that to me," Hastis said, speaking for my own feelings.

Regel replied nonchalantly. "I suppose not. We've been at this a long time. About twenty percent of the chemical thefts that have occurred around here in the last ten years were our doing."

I see. The reason Regel looked out of place was either because he was a sorcerer or simply because his gear was brand new.

"It is all for the ideal!" Lutavia raised his voice, his eyes dreaming of tomorrow. "From herbs to magical potions! We will completely control every chemical in the world and only give them to those who can treat them properly! It is only when managed under chosen administrators like us that an ideal future for medicine and humanity can be built!"

As Lutavia spoke as if intoxicated by his own words, I asked hesitantly, "...Uh... so you're not just selling them for money?"

"Of course we will sell to those with proper management and operational skills, but our goal is by no means financial gain! It is to gather chemicals in one place, to gaze upon them and smell them daily in ecstasy!"

"uh...! That... might actually be an ideal...!"

Hastis was actually being swayed! Lutavia reached out his hand to her. "Then come with me, Hastis."

She slowly shook her head. "No, Master. That might indeed be a true utopia for us. But what about the medicine? It's true they must hate being handled sloppily. But to never be used by anyone except a few people, to only be adored... isn't that also a tragedy for the medicine?"

Being unused is a tragedy for the medicine.

An unexpected counterattack. Agitation rippled through the gathered potion maniacs.

"But I cannot forgive medicine falling into the hands of those who don't even know how to manage it!"

"Even so, can you change the world with these methods?! Will that utopia ever come?!"

"Of course we know this isn't the best or even a better way! But if someone doesn't do something, the world will never change!"

Beside the group debating so heatedly, I was feeling quite detached. I mean, it was hard to get invested when they were talking about the world from such a weird angle.

The two stared at each other in silence for a while.

"Master… This is wrong," Hastis finally squeezed out the words.

Lutavia quietly lowered the hand he had been holding out. "That is a pity, Hastis. I thought you would surely understand."

"Fireball."

BOOM!

Without a single word of warning, my attack magic sent about five of the ruffians—or rather, potion maniacs—flying!

"What?! So suddenly!"

By the time Lutavia cried out in shock, I had already begun chanting my next spell! I had no obligation to listen to a thief's speech to the end when negotiations had clearly failed!

"Tch! Get them! Start with her!"

At Regel's command, the potion maniacs charged toward me all at once!

"Lina-san! I'll handle Master!"

Hastis shouted as she pulled a stirring rod from her robe. Lutavia silently drew his own rod to face his student.

Meanwhile, I turned toward the thugs closing in from all sides. "Freeze Arrow!"

CRACK-CRACK-CRACK!

"Gwah!" "Gah?!" "Damn it!"

I landed a hit, opened a hole in the encirclement, and made a full dash toward it!

"Don't let her get away!" "You brat!"

As they bunched up to chase me, the golem I had ordered to follow me trampled them from behind!

Ugh! Argh! Guff!

After a moment of chaos, I fired a follow-up Freeze Arrow as I turned around, knocking down more of the maniacs.

"But Regel is still left!" I stopped, and the golem stopped with me. Regel faced me, a shimmering stirring rod in his right hand.

"Lutavia told you, didn't he? I was a Pharmaceutical Manager too. I can use the stirring technique. No matter how many attack spells you throw, I'll stir the atmosphere itself and divert all their trajectories!"

Yes, he hadn't remained standing by accident. He had scattered my arrows of cold air with his stirring rod!

"Then how about Mega Brand?"

KABOOM!

The dirt and sand that erupted from beneath Regel's feet blew him away in a single hit, completely ignoring any "stirring of the atmosphere." How naive. If you think a sorcerer's repertoire is limited to projectiles, you're dead wrong.

All that remained was Lutavia, facing off against Hastis.

CLANG!

A high-pitched ring shook the air. The stirring rods in the hands of Hastis and Lutavia traced arcs that glinted in the sunlight, clashing and parting to play a harmony of glass!

After a brief exchange of blows, Hastis pulled back slightly to create some distance. "Lina-san!" She called out to me while keeping her eyes fixed on Lutavia. "Please let me settle this with Master myself!"

Meeting her straight gaze, Lutavia declared, "You cannot defeat me on your own."

His point was likely correct. Lutavia was superior in skill. Plus, Hastis currently had the weight of the medicine box on her back, while Lutavia did not.

"I will show you that I can win!" Hastis's resolve did not waver.

"I understand. If you're going that far, then give it a try."

"I definitely will!"

Responding to me, she gradually closed the distance between herself and her master. Lutavia, facing her, wore a gentle smile.

"Come then."

"Here I come!"

With a shout, Hastis kicked off the ground. The stirring rods in their hands sliced through the air, and the two glass rods rang out as they locked together.

For a split second, they were locked in a stalemate, their stirring rods crossed like a clash of swords. No, wait—that was wrong! Realizing the truth, I was struck with amazement.

If they were simply pushing against each other with raw strength, the glass rods would have snapped and flown apart in an instant. Why wasn't that happening? Though it looked like a simple contest of power, it was actually a clash of techniques: the skill to stir and the skill to nullify it.

The hands of both practitioners holding the stirring rods were trembling slightly, not because of the physical force they were applying, but because of a back-and-forth exchange of techniques that I couldn't even begin to imagine.

However, as the ringing of the glass grew louder, it was Hastis who gradually began to be pushed back.

"You're doing quite well, Hastis," Lutavia said with an air of composure in his voice. In contrast, a single bead of sweat rolled down Hastis's cheek. "But you see, Hastis, I have a technique that I haven't shown you yet. I shall show it to you now."

At that exact moment, a flying kick I launched from the side struck Lutavia directly in the temple! He collapsed without a prayer.

"Eeeeeeeeeeek!"

Hastis let out a scream of confusion. She looked back and forth frantically between me and the twitching Lutavia on the ground.

"Wha... wait... Lina-san! Eh? Wh... eh? What...? I mean, didn't you say I was the one who was going to settle things with Master...?"

"Yeah. I heard you."

"And you said you understood..."

"Yeah. I said I understood and told you to try it, but I never said I wouldn't lend a hand."

"Eeeeeeeeeeh... That's so... mean! You've... like... ruined everything, haven't you?"

"What are you talking about? The most important thing is the safety of the medicine, right?"

Hastis's groan of dissatisfaction was swallowed by the depths of the groves lining the road, vanishing into nothingness.

And so, the scheme of the chemical maniacs targeting the magical potions was crushed, and I had them marched away by a golem I newly created. The maniacs I had defeated and tied up were handed over to the officials in town, and I received a modest reward.

Once we reached the town with the Mage Association, we contacted the Association in Kinnal City, and the conclusion was reached that we should abort the delivery and return. Thus, the job was over. Ultimately, returning to Kinnal City, the whole thing

was treated as an unforeseen circumstance, so I received the full commission fee plus extra for the trouble, which left me with no complaints.

Well, I was a bit concerned that Hastis, having had her showdown with her master so abruptly spoiled, had no place to put her feelings and spent the entire time until we parted ways tilting her head and muttering something... but of course, that was none of my business.

(Potion Scramble: End)

The Forest of Phantom Beasts [Part 1]

It looked like any ordinary forest. Rows of trees. Thick undergrowth. The scent of green. However, the expressions of the group that had come to a halt at the entrance of the forest were tinged with tension.

Suddenly, the captain spoke. "And so, we, the investigation team, have finally reached the Forest of Letenre!"

"Huh?"

My eyes went wide. Mr. Estary, who until now had been speaking in a light tone, had suddenly started speaking with a heavy, profound gravity for no apparent reason. Normally, one would be surprised by this.

However, wondering what on earth was going on, I looked around at everyone else, but not one of his ten or so students so much as moved an eyebrow. Meanwhile, two people who seemed to be the recorders were diligently scratching Mr. Estary's narration-like lines onto parchment.

"Wait, what? What's going on?"

Leaving me alone in my confusion, Mr. Estary’s voice continued.

"A forbidden forest where no human has ever set foot! The depths of the thick trees were dark, as if refusing the entry of us who came to investigate! Does the phantom animal, the Rhino, truly exist in the depths of this forest!"

"A Rhino?!"

My voice cracked as I shouted, drawing the gaze of everyone present.

It had been an ordinary encounter, just like any other.

"By any chance, are you a traveling sorcerer?"

That morning, in the dining room on the first floor of the inn, a man around forty had approached me while I was eating breakfast. He had short-cropped black hair, sun-tanned skin, and a toned physique. He wasn't exactly handsome, but he had a face with a strange charm.

He was likely one of the group travelers. At a nearby table, a group styled like explorers, wearing shirts and trousers with an excessive number of pockets just like the man,were eating breakfast.

The man in front of me said in a light tone that didn't quite suit him, "Hey, hey, are you free right now? If you're free and you're confident in your skills, would you mind acting as our guard?"

"A guard?" I asked in return.

"Exactly. The guys we hired as guards for our animal research expedition got scared and ran away."

I had been stuffing my mouth with a fluffy cream and mushroom omelet on toast. As he spoke, the man sat himself down in the chair opposite me without being asked.

"Oh, I'm late with my introduction. I'm Broad Estary."

I recognized that name immediately and spoke up without thinking.

"Wait, are you the author of 'The Insect World You Didn't Know' and 'Wild Animals I Truly Encountered'?"

"Oh, you know them?"

"Of course!" I raised my voice excitedly.

Broad Estary. He was a quite well-known figure among sorcerers. He had researched many different creatures and had discovered several new species of animals.

"There were copies of your books even in the Mage Association of Zephilia where I used to be! I read them all the time! There were nearly ten animal encyclopedias too!"

"I'm Broad Estary. The people at that table are everyone who’s helping me out. In terms of position, I guess you could call them my students. Even though we look like

this, we're all sorcerers like you, belonging to the Seirune Mage Association. We do field work, researching various animals, and this time it's a local investigation."

"Broad Estary! Oh, I'm Lina. Lina Inverse!"

I held out my hand, and he shook it.

"Eh?? You're Lina Inverse?! I've heard rumors about you! Wow, in that case, I'd definitely love to have you as a guard. I'll make the commission fee worth your while. How about it?"

At the time, I didn't have any other jobs, and it was a request from a famous person I'd known since I was a kid, with good pay to boot. There was no reason to refuse. And so, I took the job... or so it went.

Back in the present, eyes gathered on me and the recorders' hands stopped.

"Oh, sorry for interrupting. But just now... did you say 'Rhino'?"

"I did," Mr. Estary stated matter-of-factly, and I instinctively fell silent.

There were likely many people who didn't know that name. But that was only natural. It was said to be a four-legged animal with a horn on its head and skin like armor, but in reality, no such thing existed.

Or, to be more accurate, it was an unconfirmed animal that was not recognized by the general public as existing. There were plenty of reported sightings and so-called footprints, but there had never been a case of a living one being caught, nor even a corpse being found.

...Well, to be blunt, even I found it hard to believe that such a strange animal existed.

He walked over to me with an unrepentant, beaming smile. "Sorry, sorry! But don't think I was trying to trick you. The search for the Rhino is the main thing, but we also plan to investigate various other animals living around this forest. Like river dolphins and such. In that sense, it's definitely an animal investigation."

"Oh, no, that's fine, but... how do I put it..."

As I hesitated, Mr. Estary wore a mischievous grin. "You find it hard to believe the Rhino actually exists?"

"Honestly, a little bit..."

He didn't seem offended by my opinion. "That's only natural. In the eyes of the world, it's common sense that such a thing doesn't exist. But around here, it's a fact that there are rumors about a Rhino being in the forest. So, I thought about it like this. The places we live now have become impossible to travel back and forth from because of the Desert of Destruction and the Sea of Demons. But surely, the world extends beyond the desert and the sea. You don't disagree with that, do you?"

"Well, I suppose so," I said, nodding.

According to legend, the Desert of Destruction and the Sea of Demons were created about a thousand years ago when the Demon King was resurrected. Putting the Demon King stuff aside, it was likely true that a long time ago, travel had become impossible in various places because of the desert and the sea. And that the world extended beyond them. This was also considered common sense among sorcerers.

Mr. Estary nodded back. "Even around here, it's perfectly normal for completely different creatures to live just one or two mountains away, or even between the top of a mountain and the bottom of a valley in the same area. So, it wouldn't be strange for a creature like the Rhino, which seems impossible at first glance, to live in the world beyond the desert, right?"

"Long ago, a herd of such Rhinos moved over this way, but they were cut off by the desert and couldn't get back. So they've been living here in hiding somewhere ever since—I don't think that's an impossible story at all."

"Well... I can't deny the possibility, but..."

When I said that, he brightened up and slapped my back repeatedly. "Right, right? Besides, even if we don't find a Rhino, I'm not going to reduce your commission fee or anything. So don't worry about that, okay?"

Well, if that was the case. "Understood."

"Then it's settled. And—recordings resume!"

At his signal, the recorders picked up their pens again. Mr. Estary moved back toward the group and resumed his narration.

"The sorcerer hired as a guard suddenly let out a cry of fear!"

He shot a meaningful look my way.

"Just as we were about to finally set foot in the forest!"

The entire group stared at me with expectant gazes.

"..."

In that moment of stunned silence, I muttered, "Ugh."

"Stop recording!"

Mr. Estary's voice cut in, and the recorders stopped again. A somewhat cold atmosphere drifted through the group. It was unmistakably directed at me.

"Eh? What?"

Not understanding, I watched as Mr. Estary walked over to me again, put an arm around my shoulder, and whispered, "Come on, Lina-chan! You've got to get into the spirit more!"

"The spirit...?"

I was confused by the criticism for something that seemed obvious, but he continued as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Normally, when the story is thrown to you like that, you're supposed to have a terrified look and say something like, 'I can't go any further! This is a cursed forest!' That's how the flow goes! You won't survive in this industry if you can't ad-lib a reaction like that!"

"What industry?! I mean, isn't a guard who's that much of a wimp actually a bad thing?"

At my question, he gave a wry smile. "Lina-chan, you're still young. I think you'll understand eventually. It's not just about work being stiff and serious. Rather than just seeing things with your eyes and doing it mechanically, I think it's better for both your spirit and efficiency to find a sense of fulfillment or have fun with it. I tried various ways of getting into the mood, but this kind of high-tension performance feels the best. Also, you said a wimpy guard is bad, but having the person who's supposed to be the guard get scared is a performance that emphasizes the unease of 'what on earth could be in this forest?'"

"I... I see..."

I finally understood. To put it simply, he just wanted to get hyped up in an 'explorer' mood. Mr. Estary's narration was also just for that purpose. I understood... but whether I wanted to play along was a separate issue.

After all, for a traveling sorcerer like me, outdoor activities in places where few people go were an everyday occurrence. Trying to force a high tension in such a place would only make things feel more awkward.

...Wait, maybe... those guards who 'ran away' didn't actually get scared, they just got sick of playing along with this act...

"Well, Lina-chan, since you're specializing in being a guard, I'll handle the performance for that part over here! Is that okay?"

There was a beat of silence, and after confirming no one objected, he turned to the recorders.

"Recorders! Under the picture of a terrified Lina-chan, write the words: 'I shouldn't go any further! This is a forest one must not enter!'"

The recorders' hands began to move again. It wasn't exactly fun being assigned the role of a wimpy guard, but getting into an argument about it would only make things more complicated. For now, I decided to just keep quiet and watch.

"We, the investigation team, have plunged into the forest where the phantom beast awaits!"

Using Mr. Estary's narration as a signal, the group moved into the forest. Contrary to what I had expected, the investigation activities of the group were actually quite legitimate.

"Mr. Estary! Over here! A frog that looks like a subspecies of the Madara Frog!"

"Observe and record its behavior patterns for a while before catching it as a sample. Record the situation when it was discovered. Don't forget to collect samples of the surrounding soil, grass, and tree leaves. Also, check the sunlight conditions."

"Excuse me, I'd like you to take a look at this insect—"

"Ho. The way the hind wings are attached is different from the conventional species. There's no mistake in considering this an unconfirmed species."

As soon as the work began, the students scattered as if by pre-arrangement. Mr. Estary confidently gave one instruction after another to the reports coming in from all over.

Looking at the way they investigated, everyone was quite skillful. Before entering the forest, I had the impression of a troublesome group with a weird hobby... but thinking calmly, a person's hobbies or personality don't necessarily correlate with their abilities or achievements.

Mr. Estary threw out instructions for a while, but eventually took a breath and came over to me.

"Man, Lina-chan, this place is amazing. We haven't been in long, and we've already found several animals I've never seen before."

"So, you've got a harvest?"

"A huge harvest. If we keep finding things like this as we go deeper, I could write an entire book just on that. If we find the Rhino too, my name might go down in history. Well then..."

He watched his students and muttered, "It should be about time."

"Time for what?"

Exactly as I asked, there was a rustle from a distance.

"Hey! Look at that!"

"What is it!"

"Captain! Look!"

A nearby thicket made a noise, and the researchers started shouting.

"While we were beginning our investigation, a presence suddenly appeared beyond the bushes!"

Mr. Estary ran toward the others while narrating! I followed along, and when I looked where everyone was staring:

"What we saw there was! A single horn moving beyond the bushes!"

His commentary explained everything. Above a thicket about the height of a person's back, a dark gray single horn was peeking out. It was different from a unicorn in shape and color. Could it really be—?

"Hey, isn't that the Rhino!"

Mr. Estary shouted, shifting his tone slightly. The students began to buzz.

"Let's go, everyone!"

The group dashed toward it the moment he spoke.

This was bad! Caught up in the discovery, everyone had forgotten that it might be a dangerous animal! If the Rhino really had a horn and armor-like skin as the legends said, there was a high probability it was a ferocious carnivore!

I hurriedly dashed while chanting a spell under my breath. At that moment, the horn beyond the bushes moved and started moving away from us!

"It's running!"

"Chase it!"

"Wait... Lina-chan...!"

I couldn't just let everyone go!

I pushed through the weeds and went around the thicket. What I saw ahead was a fleeing shadow!

Everyone was shouting in excitement. Don't chase it so carelessly!

I cut through—making a mental comeback—and easily overtook the group who wasn't used to walking in the forest. Behind me, I heard Mr. Estary's voice. He might have been trying to tell me not to get ahead, but chasing after it so carelessly was dangerous!

The fleeing shadow was... a Serpent-trimmed, pointlessly revealing outfit! And on top of the head, a fake horn!

In an instant!

"It's just you, Naga! Mega Brand!"

KABOOM!

"Somuuhhhhhhh!"

My strike blew the strange creature away! The person who went flying and landed on the ground was none other than the self-proclaimed rival of mine, the eccentric White Serpent Naga!

She was in her usual weird outfit, but with a horn added to her head—though why the horn didn't look out of place at all was a mystery.

The fallen Naga twitched for a bit, but eventually sat up with a start.

"Wait, what was that all of a sudden... oh, it's you, Lina! What a coincidence, seeing you in a place like this. But you should stop using attack spells to get someone's attention."

I ignored her sleep-talk-like advice and asked, "I mean... Naga, what on earth are you doing in a place like this?!"

At my question, she stood up and grandly swirled her cloak. "Hmph! Can't you tell by looking at this? This is w-o-r-k!"

"There's no such work!"

"Well, there is, so it can't be helped!"

"There isn't! Absolutely, positively not!"

From behind me as I shouted, I heard Mr. Estary's voice. "Eh? By any chance, do you two know each other?"

I hurriedly raised my left hand to the side, glaring at Naga. "Don't come over here, everyone! You'll catch something!"

"What is that supposed to mean?! Wait, Lina, are you an acquaintance of Mr. Estary?"

I frowned at Naga's line. She knew him...? And Mr. Estary had also asked if we were acquaintances. That meant Naga and Mr. Estary were acquaintances...

Mr. Estary walked toward the confused me and Naga with a smile.

"Oh, so you were acquaintances. Actually, I hired Lina-chan as our guard, and Naga-chan as the Rhino Priestess, separately."

I understood that he had hired Naga separately, but—

"What is this 'Rhino Priestess'!"

To my question, he gave a refreshing smile. "It's a setting: 'A high priestess of a tribe living in this forest who considers the Rhino sacred.' When I first saw Naga-chan, it just clicked—it had to be her."

"No, wait, wait. I think it was correct to immediately assign Naga a weird role. But what do you mean by 'setting'? Even for a setup, didn't you say this forest was 'untrodden' at first?"

Despite my protest, Mr. Estary didn't look ashamed at all. "Oh, come on, Lina-chan. 'Setup' sounds so bad. Call it a 'performance'."

"Not that I have any intention of writing 'a mysterious tribe that worships the Rhino lived here' when I summarize this investigation. I told you, didn't I? Work should be fun. This is just a performance for that. A mysterious tribe living in a place thought to be untrodden... that really builds the excitement!"

Does it really...?

To think he hired someone and set everything up beforehand just for the sake of the mood... Come to think of it, it was unnatural for Mr. Estary to be shouting in that narration style in front of what might be a phantom animal, and the reason everyone was running so slowly wasn't because they were unfamiliar with the forest, but because they knew exactly what kind of performance was needed to hype the scene—they were probably running with the intention of never catching up from the start.

"But this is a bit of a problem..."

Mr. Estary frowned and crossed his arms. "I intended to build excitement by having Naga-chan show herself every now and then... but at this point, if we try to do the same thing over again, it'll just be awkward."

"Well... whatever. In that case, Naga-chan, I'm sorry this is different from what we first talked about, but I want you to team up with Lina-chan and handle the guarding. I'll pay you the same gallery fee."

"Hmph... if that's the case, it can't be helped! I'll show you plenty of the guard skills of this White Serpent Naga! Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

I watched Naga puff out her chest and laugh like an idiot.

"Well, whatever works, but for now, take that horn off your head," I offered a very, very quiet retort.

Thus, with Naga added as a guard, the group continued their animal investigation while moving deeper into the forest. Along the way, there were times when Mr. Estary broke through "crises" with brave actions—like when the students were "attacked" by an incredibly limp snake or a venomous insect that didn't move a muscle—but basically, Naga and I remained bored the whole time.

In the afternoon, while the sun was still up, we pitched the tents and made that our campsite for the day. The members of the investigation team seemed to have plenty to do, moving around busily, reporting to one another or organizing documents.

Naga and I sat side-by-side on a fallen tree a short distance away, idly watching everyone.

"At this rate, it doesn't look like there'll be any chance to show off my skills as a guard..." Naga said, resting her chin on her hand and looking bored. By the way, she had finally taken off the horn.

I gave a wry smile beside her. "Well, if it ends peacefully without anything happening, that's fine in its own—"

I cut myself off. This familiar presence appearing from the depths of the trees—hostility!

But before Naga or I could move!

Whish!

An arrow sliced through the wind and thudded into the trunk of a tree right next to Mr. Estary, who was in the middle of a meeting!

"Whoa!"

"What was that?!"

The group buzzed with excitement! It seemed this was not a performance to build hype!

Naga and I stood up, chanting spells under our breaths.

"Oh my. I thought you were animals, but you're humans."

The mocking voice came from the direction the arrow had flown, while everyone focused their attention there. A man in his mid-twenties stepped through the bushes.

"While we were resting at camp! Suddenly, along with a single arrow, a mysterious hunter appeared before us!"

"...Eh?"

Faced with such an incomprehensible response, the hunter frowned and pulled back. Mr. Estary didn't mind and continued his narration, treating it like a question directed at the man. "What is his true identity?! And what is his purpose?"

The man had black hair covered by a green bandana, and the brown clothes he wore were stained with green spots in various places, perhaps from rubbing in grass juice. He carried a bow in his hand and a quiver on his back—the typical hunter style.

"I'm Claude Quantum, a hunter from a nearby village—"

"Don't say another word!"

"Wha?!"

The man was alone. We were many. But the man didn't seem afraid as he glanced over us, turning his gaze toward Mr. Estary. "My apologies. I didn't think there would be people in this forest."

Having his self-introduction blocked with such immense force, a look of agitation spread across Quantum's face.[1]

"You're such good material! If you blurt everything out here, it'll ruin it! Draw it out more! You were supposed to tell us to get out of the forest today, understand?!"

"...I... see. Well, that was my intention from the start, but... man. You sure are a large group. Is there some kind of festival going on?"

Asked this, Mr. Estary stood up with a sway. "Well, you know, it's that."

Quantum cleared his throat once to regain his composure. "Anyway. I don't care what your purpose is for entering this forest. But the forest isn't a place where amateurs should just wander in lightheartedly. Go home before you get mistaken for a beast and get shot or injured."

A moment of silence followed. And then, an "Ooh!" of admiration escaped from the group.

Quantum, moving past suspicious to looking at the group as if they were creepy, gave a strange look. "I've warned you! Understand?!"

With that, he spun on his heel and disappeared into the bushes at a trot. After watching him go:

"A mysterious man who left a creepy warning and departed! What is his purpose?! What truly awaits in the depths of this forest?! The mystery deepens!"

Mr. Estary's narration, now in full swing, echoed through the trees!

Immediately, one of the students chimed in, "Captain! Do you think that man just now has some connection to the Rhino?!"

"Perhaps..." Mr. Estary said with a grave expression, looking at the distant sky.

Naga and I watched them all in stunned silence. Normally, the moment Quantum showed up, I would have kicked him down and made him confess everything he knew,

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[1] He is not Quantum from Slayers smash vol 5, that is a sorcerer.

but since everyone was so hyped up, I ended up doing nothing. But... was this really okay?

Even if I looked at the distant sky, of course, there was no answer.

The night in the forest was dark. The leaves of the trees, covering more than half the sky, blocked even the faint light of the moon and stars. Compared to that darkness, the light from the campfires felt almost powerless.

It was past midnight. Everyone was fast asleep in the tents, and I was the only one awake, serving as both fire-watcher and lookout.

"Did something happen?"

It was Mr. Estary.

I asked, and he looked into the pitch-black depths of the forest. "Just now, I felt like the way the insects were chirping changed unnaturally."

Changed unnaturally?

I've had the experience several times where insects suddenly stop chirping before an attack, but at least right now, it didn't feel like that.

Had I just not noticed? Or was it his imagination? Just as I was about to ask for more details!

The insects stopped, and the leaves rustled!

"And so, at midnight as we took a breath! Into our sleeping camp, tearing through the silence of the night, from the forest—"

"Wait, Mr. Estary, you were awake?!"

Something was approaching! Something was heading straight for this camp!

"What is the identity of the sound?!"

Amidst the narration, I took a defensive stance toward the sound.

Author's Note

Hello. This is the author. I was going to write a teaser in my usual style, but I suddenly realized that Estary basically does all of that within the story. So I don't really know what to do... All I can say is that I'd be happy if you look forward to the second half.

Anyway, the "Rhino" described in the story has nothing to do with real rhinos. Please don't believe the descriptions or send me letters saying "rhinos really exist." Wait while looking for a rhino in your neighborhood!

Next time: The Forest of Phantom Beasts [Part 2]!

The Forest of Phantom Beasts [Part 2]

Synopsis Lina Inverse has accepted the job of guarding Estary and his group as they conduct an animal investigation in the forest! Rumor has it that the phantom animal, the Rhino, inhabits the forest they are investigating! Shortly after beginning the investigation, the group discovered a mysterious single horn flickering in the bushes! But what Lina defeated was Naga, wearing a fake horn, arranged by Estary to hype up the expedition! With Naga joining them, a mysterious hunter named Quantum appeared to warn everyone not to go any further! And then, on the night the group pitched camp! Something began to surge toward the camp from the depths of the forest!

The sound was coming! Tearing through the silence of the night! However, nothing could be seen; only the leaves rustling in the darkness showed a black swaying. No! That's wrong! That wriggling black was by no means the shadow of the leaves!

It was a large black mist. Of course, it wasn't just mist. Realizing what it likely was, I chanted a spell.

"Fireball!"

The sphere of light I released plunged into the front of the mist!

Kaboom!

Light scattered and flames erupted! The fire spread to the vegetation, becoming a bonfire that illuminated the night, revealing small shadows flying all around.

"It's a swarm of insects!"

I shouted back in response to Naga's question, while slamming a second Fireball into the still-approaching mist. Yes, what had looked like mist was a swarm of countless tiny insects! That was why I had unleashed fire magic!

Occasionally, the insects were drawn to the light of the flames and flew into the fire themselves, giving off a burnt smell. But—it was just a drop in the bucket! Just how many were there?! The remaining insects were still heading our way!

"Hmph! They're just insects!"

Naga talked big and began chanting a spell... but it was probably impossible to wipe them all out!

"Evacuate!"

I shouted and dashed toward the nearest tent! Mr. Estary and the students, who had poked their heads out, hurriedly pulled back inside. Just as I scrambled into the tent and closed the entrance—

BZZZZZZT.

After a moment of chaos, the students and Naga stepped out of the tents one after another.

"Wait! What happened?!"

A sound, much like the roar of heavy rain, filled the tent.

"Yellow-spotted moths, I see," one of the apprentices remarked, examining the insect carcasses scattered around.

The swarm had attacked, but as time passed, the noise eventually died away. When we cautiously crept outside, the insects were gone. Left behind were several dying embers and Naga, who had been swarmed and knocked unconscious because she couldn't finish her spell incantation in time.

Anxiety was etched on the faces of the crew! Not knowing if another attack was coming, the night wore on!

At that point, Estary stopped talking, and the pens of the chroniclers halted as well. We extinguished unnecessary fires to prevent accidents, rebuilt a small campfire, and tossed Naga into a tent.

"The swarm of insects that fell upon our camp!" Estary began his usual narration, while right behind him, the two chroniclers scribbled down his words. "In the face of that onslaught, one of our guards threw their body onto the line and fell! Is this a

warning from the forest to go no further?! Just what lies in the depths of these woods?!"

"I'd just like to confirm one thing. If I see them again, I'm going to smash them," I declared.

He looked at me with a troubled expression. "...What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb. You have an idea, don't you?"

Estary turned to the group, his tone suddenly shifting to a lighthearted one. "Alright, good work everyone! It’s an early start tomorrow, so let's all get some rest."

Instantly, the tension vanished, and everyone began to drift away. Some started chatting, while others brushed insects off the tents. Amidst this, I walked up to Estary and lowered my voice.

"Didn't I tell you? I read your encyclopedia. Those insects were only one species: yellow-spotted moths. According to your book, these things live in every forest and mountain, but they hate a certain kind of sound. Apparently, some mountain folk use insect whistles to drive them away."

Estary gave a wry smile. "I'm impressed. I can't believe you remembered something like that. Well, you're probably right, Lina. They likely used an insect whistle. Probably that hunter, Quantum."

Right. He was the man who had threatened us by firing an arrow earlier that evening. Estary called him a local hunter; if that was the case, it was natural to assume he knew the moths' nature and possessed a whistle to manipulate them.

"Estary, I think you wanted to use that hunter to spice up the 'adventure' vibe, but... well, that guy seems like he's going to do something pretty reckless. It’ll be too late to regret it after the forest is trashed or the crew gets hurt."

"I guess you're right. To be honest, calling him a 'hype man' is a bit much... If the investigation gets ruined, we’ve put the cart before the horse. I'm counting on you, Lina."

"Roger that. I'll make sure to take him down."

"Wait, Lina... 'Take him down'? What exactly do you mean...?" Estary muttered fearfully as I grew more enthusiastic.

Did we miscommunicate? Either way, Quantum, or whatever your name is! You messed with my investigation team, and I'll make sure you regret it from the bottom of hell! Hiding my righteous fighting spirit in my heart, I looked up at the night sky.

Morning at the research camp came early. Waking up not to sunlight, but to Estary's narration announcing the dawn, wasn't exactly refreshing... and since it was filled with lies, it was far from pleasant.

"---The moment we stepped into the forest!"

The crew finished breakfast, packed up camp, and set off into the depths of the woods.

Suddenly, a shadow raced from the ground into the air! One of the men walking at the front was left dangling upside down from a tree, one leg caught in a rope.

"A trap! A booby trap!! Someone set this to catch us!"

Estary's narration flew out instantly, and the chroniclers' hands moved. Once he finished his narration, Estary and the apprentices rushed toward their dangling comrade—but!

"---This is...!"

Estary looked up at the hanging man and said regretfully, "If I had known there was such a delicious setup, I would have been the one to get caught!"

Are you jealous?!

At that moment, the grass rustled and a scream echoed.

Two dogs burst out from the depths of the bushes, howling loudly!

"Freeze Arrow!" "Ray Wing!"

Naga fired her spell, stopping the dogs in their tracks with ease. I used high-speed flight magic to take to the air, heading toward where the dogs had come from.

Pushing through branches and grass with a wind barrier, I found two men dressed as hunters.

They were aiming for us while we were pinned down by the trap! One had a beard, the other didn't. Neither was the man from yesterday, but they were surely his companions! They leveled their bows and released their arrows.

I charged anyway. The arrows were deflected by my wind barrier. I saw the shocked faces of the two hunters as I closed in. I knocked them both back, deactivated my spell, and landed. With my cloak and hair fluttering, I spun around.

The bearded one hit a tree trunk; the clean-shaven one was on the ground. I dashed over and stomped on the head of the clean-shaven one as he tried to get up.

"Guh! You...!" The bearded man scrambled to draw his hatchet. "No further!"

I drew my short sword, pointed the tip at him, and said quietly, "I won't hold back either. This is a fight to the death. Do you want to continue?"

Without waiting for an answer, I began chanting a spell loud enough for him to hear. The man’s gaze wavered.

"W-Wait!" He threw his hatchet away and raised his hands, sweat beads forming on his forehead. "W-we were just talked into it because of the money! We didn't really mean to...!"

"Well, for now, why don't you tell us the whole story?" I said coldly, keeping my sword leveled.

We tied up the two hunters and surrounded them.

"So," I began as the representative. "You said you were 'talked into it.' Tell us clearly: by whom and how? If you don't talk... things might get a bit unpleasant for your doggies too."

I glanced over at the two hounds Naga had frozen. The clean-shaven man’s face went pale. "I-I get it! I'll tell you everything! Just don't hurt the dogs!"

He really cared about those dogs. That made things easy. "If you talk, we won't harm them. Well?"

The man didn't hesitate. "Claude! Claude Quantum lured us in! He asked if we wanted to strike it rich!"

"So it was him."

"Yeah! If I had the money, I could feed my dogs better food! That’s why I went along with it!"

"Forget the dogs. What do you mean by 'striking it rich'?"

At the mention of money, Naga’s eyes sparkled. "Yes, exactly! Give us the details on that!"

That was what bothered me too. What exactly was this "fortune"?

"You won't believe it anyway," the bearded man spat. The other one added sheepishly, "To be honest... I'm half-doubting it myself..."

When they hesitated, I whispered, "The dogs—"

"I'll talk! I'm talking! It's the Rhinoceros!"

The group stirred.

"...A rhinoceros?" Estary’s voice was hoarse.

"In this forest, there's a phantom animal called the Rhino—"

"We know the rumors! What about it?!" Estary practically screamed.

"He told us! He said he saw a Rhino in this forest! He said if we catch it or kill it and sell it, we'll be famous millionaires! We could give the dogs a life of luxury!"

The research team was in an uproar. A rhinoceros? Could it really exist?

"But if you guys found it first, we wouldn't get a dime! So he told us to help drive you out of the forest!"

Looking at the bearded man, it didn't seem like they were lying.

".....Is that... really true...?" even my own voice was trembling.

"At least it's true that he said so! I doubted it at first, but he asked why he would need to tell a lie like that—"

"And you bought it...?" I muttered.

"Yeah! It looks like he reached out to a few others besides us, so I don't think it's just a tall tale!"

Silence filled the forest. Then, Estary’s narration exploded.

"We have finally... grasped a clue that the Rhinoceros truly exists!"

Behind him, the chroniclers' pens were flying.

"The mysterious hunter, Quantum, who left us a cryptic warning, has allegedly found the Rhino in this forest! And now, that same Quantum is moving his allies to capture it!"

Estary stopped, and an apprentice chimed in perfectly. "Captain! If the hunters find the Rhino before we do, they might kill it!"

"Yes! To prevent that, we must find and protect the Rhino before they do, no matter what!" Estary nodded with unnecessary strength, staring pointlessly at the distant sky.

Wow. Those apprentices really get Estary’s vibe. Their timing is perfect.

"Can we find the Rhino before the hunters do?!" Estary finished his narration, looked around at everyone, and saw their fighting spirit rising. "So, everyone! From now on, finding the Rhino is our priority! If we find it, there'll be a bonus!"

The whole group erupted in cheers. But amidst the excitement...

"Huh?"

"Hmph. Sorry to spoil the mood, but I'm dropping out!" Naga said suddenly.

Estary looked confused, but Naga just tossed her hair back. "I just remembered I have some business to attend to."

I see. "In other words, you thought of a plan to find the Rhino by yourself and keep the reward, right?"

Naga flinched. "W-what are you saying, Lina! I just... oh, right! I remembered I left a pot on the fire! So, that's that! See ya!"

She unilaterally spouted some nonsensical reason, then chanted a spell.

“Ray Wing!”

She soared into the sky and vanished beyond the trees in the blink of any eye. For a moment, the group stared blankly at the spot where Naga had disappeared, but eventually...

“...Well. Shall we go, everyone?” Estary said, turning on his heel with total composure.

“Um, excuse me. Is it really okay not to stop Naga? That woman was clearly intending to scoop us,” I asked.

However, he only gave a wry smile.

“Don't worry about it, Lina. It’s not like a rank amateur is going to find it just by moving around recklessly. Besides, she didn’t exactly look like the type to listen to persuasion. More importantly, everyone wants to go look for the Rhino as quickly as possible right now.”

“I see.”

It was a precise judgment. If Naga were the kind of person who stopped when told to stop, the hardships I’d faced up until now would have been cut by more than half. As expected of someone knowledgeable about living things; he properly understood even strange organisms like Naga.

“Well then... let’s go, everyone!”

At Estary’s call, the group let out a shout of agreement! With Estary himself in the lead, we formed a line and headed toward the depths of the forest where no paths existed.

Honestly, even I felt a bit of a flutter in my chest. After we finished clearing the traps, we left the tied-up hunters and the thawed-out hounds behind and proceeded deeper into the woods. There was no hesitation in Estary's stride as he walked.

"...Um. By the way, where exactly are we headed?"

Shortly after we started moving, I threw the question that had suddenly occurred to me at him.

"I found it while looking for a place to camp yesterday. There's a watering hole a little ways away. We're headed there."

He said it nonchalantly when asked.

"A watering hole?"

"I mean, they have to drink water, right? If we find even a footprint, the rest is just a matter of tracking."

"I see."

I was convinced by his answer. It made perfect sense! We might be the ones to find a creature that was said to be a phantom! There was no way not to be excited by this!

"If we don't find anything, we'll just follow the water flow to another watering hole and search there. It's much more certain than just circling around the forest aimlessly."

Neither the traps nor the work of removing them could dampen our morale!

Then, as if waiting for Estary to finish saying those words...

Flap, flap, flap, flap!

Following the sound, birds took flight all at once from the distant treetops!

"—Over there!"

"Circle around!"

"Don't let it get away!"

The angry shouts of men echoed from afar! Everyone looked at each other! Naturally, everyone was thinking the same thing. Quantum and his group had found the Rhino! I turned my eyes toward Estary.

“I’ll go ahead to protect the Rhino!”

“I’m counting on you, Lina!”

“Roger!”

With that, I chanted the spell.

“Ray Wing!”

I soared into the air using high-speed flight magic!

Snap!

The grass rustled, and Estary was left hanging in the air!

“...Come to think of it, I completely forgot... we were in the middle of clearing the traps, weren’t we?” Estary said wearily as he dangled there.

I increased my altitude to get above the trees and reached the area where the commotion was happening. I frowned at the sight below. There was a slight break in the forest trees, and a modest stream was running through it. By the side of the small stream, there were two human figures.

Of course, they were different from the two who had set the dogs on us earlier, but they were likely hunters who had been swayed by Quantum’s smooth talking. The two were running around hitting the nearby trees with sticks, making some kind of racket. That was all. What on earth were they doing? Judging by the location, these two must have been the cause of the earlier noise, but...

...I see. So that was it!

I controlled the spell, doubled back the way I came, and landed in front of the approaching research team.

“Stop! This way is a bust.”

“A bust?” Estary stopped and asked. I nodded.

“The men were just making noise for no reason. If it’s not that—then they intend to lure us in and spring some kind of trap. Or maybe they want to pull us away from somewhere by drawing us toward them.”

“Pull us away... I see!” The tone of Estary’s voice jumped. “From the place where they actually found the Rhino!?”

“Probably. Setting traps, siccing dogs... they likely figured that if we gave up and left the forest, that would be that. But if we didn't give up, their plan was to lure us in the wrong direction. In other words, the place where Quantum saw the Rhino is probably the opposite direction, across from the campsite!”

“It seems worth checking out! —Alright everyone, about face! We’re heading the opposite way!”

At Estary’s command, everyone turned on their heels.

“Lina, I’m sorry, but... could you fly ahead for a bit? As a forward scout, I guess you’d call it. I want you to do that. If your hypothesis is correct, we’ve ended up getting a late start because we came this way. I want to make up for that as much as possible. If anything happens, we’ll call each other by whistling or something.”

It was no longer the work of a guard, but now was not the time to be drawing lines between duties!

“Roger! Well, I’m off!”

I answered and took to the sky once more with flight magic! Of course, the forest was thick with trees. Just looking down from above, I couldn't tell much about the situation on the ground. So, I flew over yesterday’s campsite, deactivated the spell a short distance away, and landed.

Not long after I started walking straight through the forest, hostility flashed in the swaying grass!

“Freeze Arrow!!”

There was only one person who would do something like this.

“What happened to the stew pot, Naga?”

She appeared from the depths of the bushes and launched an attack without warning—it was none other than Naga!

“Dug Wave!”

Dashing into the shadow of a tree, I dodged the dozen or so arrows of cold air that flew in from the side! If that was the case, it would be faster to just smash Naga and freeze her to stop her movements!

“Ho-ho-ho-ho! It’s useless to try and change the subject!”

In response to my question, Naga let out her usual stupid laugh and pointed a finger sharply at me.

“I know all about it, Lina Inverse! Your plot to catch the Rhino and keep the profit all for yourself! The fact that you’re here alone is proof enough!”

“I’m telling you! That’s your story!”

“Hmph! It seems that was the clincher! Because you think that way yourself, you see me in the same light!”

That’s also your story. I thought so, but now was not the time to nitpick every little thing. While we were doing this, Quantum might be finding the Rhino.

I chanted a spell in my mind, lowered my body, and leaped out from the shadow of the tree. The ground exploded with a roar! However, by then, Naga had already leaped back and dodged!

With that as the trigger, the spell battle began!

“Freeze Arrow!” “Dug Haute!” “Elmekia Lance!”

Numerous powers crossed paths, gouging the earth, snapping trees, and scattering leaves! However, the forest itself interfered with each other's attacks. The thick trees and foliage constantly blocked our vision and line of fire. Spells that erupted from the ground had their range and power drastically reduced by the densely packed tree roots. When I tried to break a tree branch to drop it on her, it got caught in vines and didn't fall.

It was frustrating beyond belief, but it was likely the same for Naga.

“Vice Freeze! ...Oh, honestly!”

The wave of cold air Naga released hit a tree branch that had snapped and fallen due to the aftermath of the battle before I even had to dodge, freezing it solid.

The two of us moved while firing cautionary attack spells, searching for a place where it was easier to fight. The sound of grass being roughly trampled echoed—

Then, at that moment.

“Whoa!”

“What!”

“You!”

Startled voices rose from the group!

“—And at that moment! The sound of battle was heard from ahead of us! Just what is happening there!?”

What was that! Considering the possibility of being shot from behind, I moved between the shadows of the trees in a zigzag pattern.

Coming from a distance behind me was Estary’s narration! Dammit! They’d caught up! I turned my eyes that way, but I still couldn't see the research team because of the trees.

“Don’t come any closer! You’ll get caught in it!” I shouted at the top of my lungs.

There was a beat.

“The voice of the guard sorceress rang out, warning of danger!”

The apprentice’s voice followed. “Captain! What should we do!?”

“We can’t just abandon our comrades! Let’s go!”

“Yes, sir!”

Listen to what people tell you!

I turned my back on Naga and started running toward Estary and the others! But there was no attack from behind, and before long, what came into view was Estary's group and—

"Answer me! Where did the Rhino go!"

Confronting them was the hunter Quantum, leveling his bow and arrow!

An arrow was stuck in a tree near Estary's group; he must have been the one who fired it. Whatever misunderstanding he'd fallen into, he seemed to think we had found the Rhino. But in any case, coming out into the open was his undoing!

I slowly tried to circle around to the side—

"Don't move!"

I stopped at Quantum's command.

"You're after the Rhino too, aren't you!?"

I shouted the question, and he shouted back, not wanting to be outdone.

"So what if I am! I'm going to catch the Rhino, make a fortune, and split it with my fellow hunters. That's why you lot, who are also looking for the Rhino, were in the way! So I told you to leave, and I harassed you by siccing the moths on you!"

"So what are you going to do about it!"

"...I'm not going to do anything, but—"

The moment I said that.

"Freeze Arrow!"

Cling!

"Agh!?"

The arrow of cold air released by Naga, who had been approaching while circling around, hit Quantum directly! It froze his limbs solid!

Yes. I had called out to Quantum in a loud voice to distract him and induced Naga to attack this guy. In any case, it was Naga. I figured that if she remembered her grudge

about the moths from last night, she would attack Quantum first... and it went exactly as I'd read.

"...I see... so it was you. The one who set those moths on me yesterday."

A flame of resentment burned in Naga's eyes. Of course, if I left her like this, there was a possibility that Naga would beat Quantum down with attack spells to satisfy her heart's desire for revenge and then attack us.

But—I gave a sharp thumbs-up.

"Nice one, Naga! The plan to lure him out by pretending we'd split up and then taking him down! It worked perfectly, didn't it! Maybe we can even get a bonus for this part!"

"Bonus?"

Naga blinked. She probably thought it would be fine to betray me after she got the bonus.

"...Hmph! This level of work is nothing!"

She puffed out her chest with great arrogance, playing along just as I'd intended.

"Well then."

We tied up Quantum so he couldn't move and surrounded him.

"You seem to have seen the Rhino," I questioned him.

"Where did you see it?"

I expected him to say something like, "Like I'd tell you."

Instead, he said, "Huh?" with an expression that seemed to say, *Don't play dumb*.

"Why bother asking that every single time? You guys just saw it too, didn't you?"

He said something completely incomprehensible. Everyone looked at each other again. Of course, no one had any idea what he was talking about.

Everyone instinctively looked at each other—of course, no one had seen a Rhino. We shook our heads slightly from side to side.

I looked at Quantum again. “We didn't see it.”

“Liar! I came here because I heard the Rhino’s cry and the commotion!”

“The Rhino’s cry?”

By the way, Naga was with us pretending to be an ally, but there was a fear she might go on a rampage again once she finished hearing the story. While keeping a wary eye on her as well, I asked for the time being.

“...We didn't hear it, though.”

“You could hear it clearly!” Quantum yelled, getting worked up.

He didn't look like he was lying, but...

“I mean, what does a Rhino’s cry even sound like in the first place?”

“I told you! It’s a strangely high-pitched, weird bird-like voice! Like, Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!”

Everyone froze at Quantum’s words.

A single possibility likely flashed through everyone’s minds at that moment.

“...I have to ask... did you *really* see the Rhino’s entire body? It wasn't just... the horn, was it...?”

“Just the horn! But I’m a hunter! If I see that much, I know it’s not any other animal! And then there’s that cry!”

Suddenly, Quantum shouted, “Ah! There! That’s it!”

“I knew it!”

Everyone collapsed to their knees on the spot.

And so, the series of events surrounding the Rhino came to an end. Quantum was poked and prodded from all sides by the companions he had recruited, looking utterly dejected as he left the forest.

Our investigation team remained in the woods for a few more days to continue the animal survey, but in the end, we couldn't find a single trace of a Rhino. However, no matter how much silence followed, it didn't negate the possibility that a Rhino lived

in these woods! There were still unknown possibilities in this world! Estary and the others would likely continue to pursue them!

Though I'd personally had quite enough!

Eventually, Estary silently rummaged through his backpack, pulled out a wooden stick, and held it out. "Here, Naga-chan. This is a spare."

Naga accepted it without a word, attached the spare horn to her head, placed her hands on her hips, and let out a "Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

...I was certain I received a sufficient commission fee. Yet, feeling strangely exhausted, I brought my job as a guard to a close.

(The Forest of Phantom Beasts: End)

Exorcism According to Plan [Part 1]

The carriage moved through the rain. The wheels splashed through the mud, and the sound of the rain drummed against the ceiling. Visible through the window were dark cityscapes and a dark sky.

“We are almost there.”

Spoken to, I looked at the person sitting in the opposite seat. He looked to be fifty or sixty. He wore a black coat and a black hat, with a slender build and a quiet gaze.

I believe his name was Reeves. He had come to the inn to fetch me. I had happened to be passing through this place, Mithrilcan City, on a whim when I got caught in this rain and ended up stranded. I wasn't short on funds for the inn, nor was I in a particular hurry. I had prepared to wait for the rain to stop, but one day passed, then two. I was getting quite bored when Mr. Reeves appeared.

He was the butler for a place called the Klaon house. He had been ordered by his master to find a sorcerer, but unfortunately, there was no Sorcerers' Association in this city. He had been considering going to another city to search when he overheard a rumor about a sorceress staying at the inn—me—and had come with the carriage.

By the way, I had heard of the Klaon family name. While I was idling in the inn’s dining area, I had heard other guests mentioning the name in their gossip. According to them, they were the wealthiest family in town, and they had a somewhat troublesome playboy of a son.

Since I was struggling with boredom and there was a chance to make a profit if things went well, I decided I could at least listen to the story. I stood up from my chair at the inn, and now here I was in the carriage.

Looking out the window, this town wasn't all that large for being called a “city.” Once we passed the central district where the inns were lined up, the houses suddenly became sparse. Fields, vacant lots, and groves of trees became prominent.

“I see it,” Mr. Reeves said after we had been driving for a while.

When I looked where he pointed, a large mansion stood darkly amidst a cedar grove shrouded in rain. It would likely look different on a sunny day, but viewing it in this

situation, it looked like nothing but a haunted house. The carriage splashed through the mud toward that black mansion.

The mansion was the definition of "stately." The entrance hall and the guest room I was led into were magnificent, giving a sense of history. The walls, floors, and pillars were all polished to a shine, possessing a depth that only comes with the passage of time. It felt like the home of a prestigious family with a long history... but because of that, seeing the aged interior and furniture dimly lit by the light filtering through thick rain clouds was a bit eerie.

I was guided to the guest room, served fragrant tea, and left alone to wait for a short while. Eventually, there was a knock at the door, and Mr. Reeves, the butler entered the room with a man who looked to be in his mid-forties.

He wasn't exactly portly, but his frame carried a bit of extra weight for his age. He wore high-quality clothes, but there was a deep look of exhaustion around his eyes, and white hairs were noticeable in his brown hair. He gestured for me to sit as I stood to greet him.

“I am the master of this house, Karman Klaon.”

He sat down—or rather, dropped—onto the sofa across the table with a voice that lacked any tension.

“I am Lina. Lina Inverse.”

I introduced myself, but Karman simply remained silent, a look of hesitation lingering in his eyes.

“I was told you had something to discuss?”

Even when I prompted him, he remained tight-lipped. For a while, the only sound was the rain outside filling the world.

“Well...”

Eventually, he began to let out words bit by bit.

“Let me ask you... Miss Lina... do you believe in... curses... or things of that nature?”

“Curses, you say...” I thought for a moment.

Needless to say, curses—that is, hexes—exist as a field of sorcery. However, curses and "divine curses" or hauntings are different. A hex is an influence exerted on a specific person through techniques and methods backed by magical theory. On the other hand, a "divine curse" is said to be the negative effect that strikes a human who has fulfilled specific conditions, such as entering a forbidden place. It’s like a magical "idiot trap."

However, in the Sorcerers' Association, research into these hauntings hasn't actually progressed very much. The most honest answer was that I couldn't say anything for certain.

“I believe that hauntings do exist.”

When I said that, he hesitated again. “I see... well then...”

“Is it possible... for a person to be possessed by something because of a haunting and be driven to strange behavior?”

I see. I was starting to see where this was going. But it would be bad form to get ahead of his words here. I pretended not to notice anything.

“The existence of beings whose core is in the astral side, like demons and ghosts, is publicly recognized. So, I don't think it would be strange if the things you're describing happened because of such beings.”

At my answer, he looked at me with a pleading gaze. “Then... if such a thing were the case, could you... drive away 'something' that has possessed 'someone'!?”

Honestly, I didn't have that kind of confidence at all, but...

“I won't know if I can or can't until I actually see the person and try a few things.”

“...Mm...”

Karman groaned at my non-committal reply. Silence followed once again.

Boom.

Distant thunder echoed. So it wasn't just rain anymore; the lightning had started too.

“...I would like to ask that this remain strictly confidential...”

I nodded, and with his eyes downcast, he followed a groan of agony with:

“The person possessed by something... is my... son...”

The sound of rain and distant thunder filled the air after he spoke.

There was a legend in this area. A long time ago, a demon appeared in this land and made the people suffer. A priest appeared, fought the demon, and defeated it. However, it was said that even in death, the demon’s corpse continued to scatter the power of a curse, so the priest built a mound to seal it away.

...Well, not to be rude, but it was the kind of common legend you could find just about anywhere.

Karman’s son, Thomas, had kicked the mound as a prank when he was a child—and since then, his behavior had become strange. He would occasionally lose his memory. During those times, he started using violent language and performing odd actions.

Hearing this, I remembered the townspeople’s rumors about the playboy son. Karman finished the long story piece by piece.

“...There is a Red Dragon God Church in this city... The other day, I asked a priest there to perform an exorcism... but he ended up saying it was beyond his power... and that was the end of it. So, I thought perhaps a sorcerer might be able to help... can you drive away the thing that has possessed my son...?”

“Hmm...” I thought for a moment.

While stories of things possessing people are common in rumors, they are almost never reported or studied as actual cases. Since there were no precedents or records to speak of, it was impossible to say for sure if I could do it. According to the story, even the church priest had given up just the other day...

I suddenly frowned. “Um. You said the church person gave up, but when was that?”

“About three days ago. It was the day before this rain started falling. Is... something the matter?” Karman answered smoothly.

“No, well. Why did you wait until 'three days ago' to call a church person if your son has been acting strange since he kicked the mound 'as a child'?”

“Ah. That is because it was four days ago that I was told by my son that it was because of a haunting.”

“...Huh?”

I furrowed my brow at the nonsensical statement. In contrast, Karman wore a carefree smile.

“No. My son has always had a lively and uninhibited side. I’m ashamed to say he often caused quite a bit of trouble here and there. He was a bit more than I could handle, so four days ago, I told him I would disown him if he did anything else... Then, he confessed that he had kicked the mound as a child. He said that while he occasionally acts out, it’s because of the demon’s haunting, and he isn't at fault at all. I see, I thought, and was convinced.”

“That is one hundred percent a lie!”

Crrr-ack-boom!

The latter half of my shout was drowned out by a bolt of lightning that struck unexpectedly close.

"Based on what you've told me, the thing possessing him is likely a demon," I said.

"I knew it... My poor son..." Kalman's face lit up with a mix of dread and strange validation. I decided to just keep calling him Kalman—at any rate, he was a total idiot of a father.

I held up a finger and shook my head slowly to cut him off. "The priest also suggested the possibility that your son was lying. However, my son is not the type to tell lies."

I see. So that was it. All the mysteries were solved! Simply put, a bratty son had spun a web of lies, and his failure-of-an-educator father had swallowed them whole. That was all there was to it! Even the priest’s comment about it being 'out of his hands' was just a polite way of saying, *'I'm not dealing with you two idiots.'*

Once I understood that, things moved quickly. I nodded with a dead serious expression. "I understand. I might be able to manage something. Let’s give it a try."

"Oh! Then—!"

"If we try to drive it out of your son's body, the enemy will naturally resist," I explained. "In the process, some things might get smashed or broken, but that will all

be the fault of the demon possessing your son. Any damage costs will be considered necessary expenses, so you'll have to cover those."

"...I... I understand."

"Also, even if your son doesn't lie, the demon possessing him certainly will. To save itself, it will pretend to be your son and say all sorts of things. You must never believe it. I will be the one to judge whether it's your son's voice or the demon's lies."

"How will you judge that?" Kalman asked, looking uneasy.

Meeting his gaze head-on, I answered firmly without a hint of hesitation, "With, you know, some kind of magical power."

"Magical power... is it?"

"Yes. Sorcery."

"I see... If it's sorcery, then it can't be helped..."

He bought it. This guy was a real moron. I put on a somber expression. "To be honest, I can't guarantee we can definitely drive the entity out."

"No—"

I silenced his protest with a hand. "Of course, I'll do my best. But I want you to understand that this is a dangerous job for me as well. So, for the reward... I'd like to say fifty gold coins, but since there's no guarantee of total success, ten up front. You cover expenses. If I fail, we leave it at that. If I succeed, the remaining forty. How does that sound?"

"Um... uh..." Kalman hesitated for a moment at the price, which was by no means cheap, but ultimately he nodded. "Understood. On those terms."

The moment the door opened, lightning flashed outside the window. For a split second, the light burned the image of a man sitting on the bed, picking his ear with his pinky, onto my retinas.

After settling things with Kalman, I had headed straight to the second-floor room where his son, Thomas, was. Thomas looked to be about twenty. He had the same

brown hair as his father and was handsome enough, I suppose, but his face had a certain looseness to it.

"What's with the girl? Pops, if this is some kind of service, I'd prefer a more mature woman." Thomas said mockingly, making a rounded shape in front of his chest with both hands.

The hell? I felt a vein throb in my temple. I knew I was getting ticked off, but for now, I had to stay calm. I'd have plenty of time to make him pay for that stupid quip.

I nodded with a straight face. "No mistake. Something is definitely possessing him. I can almost see a black shadow clearly."

"Oh! Just as I thought!" Kalman cried out.

"Hey... what's this all of a sudden?" Thomas stood up from the bed as the rumbling of the thunder lingered. He directed a wary look at the three of us—me, Kalman, and the butler.

I maintained a perfectly serious face. "By my estimation, the true identity of what's possessing your son is... likely a demon, the Hellmaster Phibrizzo."

I just pulled a random name of a demon from legend.

Kalman frowned uneasily. "Phib... ri... sounds like a bug's name, doesn't it?"

"It is bug-like. Imagine a camel cricket, but with much, much longer legs."

"Uwah! That sounds disgusting!"

"Its specialty is sexual harassment," I continued with a straight face, saying things that would probably make the real Phibrizzo fly into a rage if he actually existed and heard me. Well, I had no plans to ever meet a legendary demon in my life, so it didn't really matter.

Kalman nodded repeatedly. "Sexual harassment, is it? I see, that makes sense."

He seemed strangely convinced.

"If 'that makes sense,' does that mean this guy has caused a lot of trouble involving sexual harassment?" I asked.

"Yes. Quite often. You wouldn't believe how hard it was to hush it all up... it was a real nuisance."

He was talking about his son as if he were talking about the possessing demon. It was clear he was okay with it. My plan was to use the excuse of 'exorcising the demon' to give this bratty son a little taste of pain and encourage some self-reflection... but judging by the way Kalman spoke without a shred of thought for the victims, he needed a lesson too.

Which meant! Blowing up three or four rooms would be perfectly okay!

I cracked my knuckles. "Right then. Shall we get started with the... *thorough* exorcism?"

"E... Exorcism...?" Thomas stammered, cowering back.

I flashed a grin at him. "Heh heh heh... Of course. I just need to make the demon possessing your body go through such an ordeal that it screams, 'I've had enough of this body! I'm going home!' and runs away at full speed."

"W-wait a minute! What exactly does that—!" Thomas pressed himself against the window, terrified. If this had been the first floor, he probably would have jumped out to escape.

"Let's see. For starters, I'll perform some 'spell-like' chants while delivering 'sorcery-ish' punches and 'magic-flavored' axe kicks—"

"Wait! 'Like' and 'ish' and 'flavored' means it's not magic at all! Pops! Pops! Stop this woman!"

Without even looking back at Thomas, I spoke to his father. "You understand, don't you? If you listen to the voice of the demon now, Thomas will never return to being a decent human being."

"Mu... ghh... Bear with it, Thomas! It's for the sake of driving the monster from your body!"

I heard Kalman's voice from behind me. And then, the thunder and Thomas's scream echoed in unison.

I opened my eyes in the darkness. It wasn't total darkness; a tiny flame flickered on the wall, faintly outlining the furniture. Outside the window was pitch black. The night had not yet broken.

The reason I woke up at this hour was that I sensed someone standing outside the door. Before I could even wonder who it was, there was a *knock-knock*.

"Lina-sama."

It was the butler’s reserved voice. That brought back everything that had happened that day. I had intended to finish the 'exorcism' and settle the matter today, but...

"I'm awake," I replied, sitting up in bed.

"Master Thomas is gone," the butler said from the other side of the door.

"Whaaaaaaaaat?!"

I leaped out of bed and dressed quickly.

"It appears his shoes are gone as well."

"You mean he ran away?!" It sounded like it was still raining outside.

"Presumably."

After my initial 'sorcery-ish' armbar followed by an 'astral-like' axe bomber, Thomas had fainted quite easily. How annoying! Since he wouldn't wake up no matter how much we shook or prodded him, the 'full-scale exorcism' had been postponed until tomorrow.

I had accepted Kalman’s invitation to stay at the mansion, ate a delicious meal, took a bath, and fallen asleep in a fluffy bed—and now, I was hearing this.

I finished getting ready, threw my cloak on with a flourish, and swung the door open. The butler stood there holding a lamp. Candelabras were lit throughout the hallway, and I could hear the sounds of people moving about.

The butler turned and began to walk, and I followed. "A maid on night watch found the door to Master Thomas's room wide open."

He spoke without turning around. "We called the staff and searched under the bed and in the closets, but he was nowhere to be found. We noticed his shoes were

missing. As a precaution, I have everyone searching the grounds, but it is likely he has gone outside."

As he spoke, we arrived at Thomas's room. The door was wide open. Inside, Kalman was pacing around restlessly.

"Oh, Lina-san! Thomas is—!"

He ran toward me as soon as he saw me. I gave him a single nod. "I heard. But... the question is, how did he escape?"

I scanned the room. The window was locked, the sound of the persistent rain muffled by the glass.

"What do you mean, 'how'?"

"I asked you when we finished the 'exorcism' today, didn't I? I told you to keep this room locked. You didn't... forget to lock it, did you?"

Kalman shook his head frantically. "No, no! I locked it properly!"

"Then how did Thomas get out of a locked room?"

He looked at me with a blank expression. "Well, it opens from the inside."

"THEN THE LOCK IS POINTLESS!!"

He jumped at my shout. "Eh!? Was that not allowed!?"

"Of course it's not allowed! What do you think a lock is for!?"

Kalman’s eyes wandered for a split second before it hit him. "Could it be... it was to keep Thomas from going out!?"

"You're just realizing that now!?"

"You didn't tell me, so I didn't know!"

"You should know that much on your own!"

"Master Kalman!" a maid shouted, appearing breathless at the doorway. "The safe is open and empty! We think it was the young master’s doing!"

"What!?"

"Anyway! Even if he fled outside, in this rain, he shouldn't be too far—"

I was cut off as more maids appeared one after another.

"A set of rain gear is missing!" "The carriage is gone!" "The driver is missing!"

"Even the driver!?" I yelled.

The butler replied calmly. "We hadn't informed all the servants of the situation. He likely ordered the carriage out, and they obeyed."

Aaaargh. I felt like burying my head in my hands, but there was no time for that! If he had a carriage, even a slight delay would create a huge gap.

"Prepare for pursuit immediately! Get every available carriage ready! Pick out the places Thomas used to frequent! Form a search party—I need men and rain gear!"

I barked orders at the panicked group.

"Y-yes...!" "Right away!"

The maids and the butler scrambled to move. And so, in the pouring rain, the operation to track down Thomas began.

Naturally, searching on a rainy night was difficult. We couldn't follow wheel tracks, and there were no pedestrians to question. Furthermore, we only managed to scrape together one carriage and six men. No matter how I looked at it, we were short-handed, but there was no helping it.

This was the limit of the people I could mobilize.

Incidentally, Kalman and the butler stayed behind to watch the house. The search method was extremely simple. We moved by carriage, and at places Thomas was likely to stop, we split up to ask around and scout the perimeter. Then everyone would gather to exchange information, and if there were no leads, we moved to the next location. I basically waited in the carriage, concentrating on organizing and analyzing the information. That was the general procedure.

I had already repeated this two or three times, but there was still no sign of a lead. If by some chance Thomas had left the city, finding him would be next to impossible... but for now, I decided not to think about that possibility.

When I looked out the window, the light from the lamps swayed like will-o'-the-wisps in the darkness torn by the rain. On the edge of that small light, a black shadow flickered. The shadow became two figures in raincoats, splashing through the mud and jogging toward me. It was one of the pursuit teams that had split into three groups of two.

"Group one, no leads," said one of the men.

"Good work," I said, checking the map.

Soon, another two arrived. "Group three, we found no sign of the young master."

Once the last two returned, I wondered where we should head next, comparing the map with the list of Thomas's frequent haunts. However.

"They aren't coming back." Someone muttered this after quite some time had passed.

Yes. The two men from group two who went to investigate had not yet returned.

"I think a slight delay is within the margin of error, but..." I whispered.

I waited a bit longer, but there was still no sign of them.

"Let’s go take a look. Sorry, but you two from group one, come with me. Group three, wait here." I said, lifting myself off the seat.

"No. Lina-san, you stay here. We’ll go check it out," one of the men from group one said considerately, but I shook my head.

"There’s a chance they found him. If so, it’s better if I’m with you."

Pulling the hood of my borrowed raincoat over my head, I stepped out into the night. The soles of my boots sank into the mire. The pre-dawn city was simply dark.

"The lamp!"

I waved off the driver who tried to hand me a lamp and chanted a spell under my breath.

"Lighting!"

I cast the magical light onto the tip of the scabbard of my short sword, using it as a substitute for a torch. It wasn't just dark; it was black. I moved forward followed by the two men, toward the area group two was supposed to have searched. The rain beat against my hood as I trudged through the muddy road.

"They aren't here..." one of my companions shouted over the sound of the rain.

"Maybe we missed each other. Maybe they're back at the carriage by now," the other companion suggested.

That was a possibility, but...

"Something's bothering me," I said. "In group two's search area, there was supposed to be one of Thomas's favorite shops, something called 'The Rainbow Rabbit.' From what I've seen, there wasn't any light that looked like it."

I didn't know what kind of shop it was, but if it were open, there should be some light. However, in the area we just walked through, I hadn't seen any such glow.

"It's this rain. Maybe they closed up because no customers were coming," one of them said.

That might be true, but it might not be.

"Just to be safe. Let's look for that shop. There should at least be a sign out."

"Understood."

At my suggestion, the two nodded with an air of reluctant compliance. We held up the light and retraced our steps, looking at the surrounding buildings. Before long...

"What's that?"

I found a piece of wood hanging at the entrance of an alley. Bringing the light closer, I saw the words 'The Rainbow Rabbit' and an arrow pointing deep into the alley painted on the wet wood.

"A hit," I said, peering into the alley, but no light was visible at all.

Walking forward regardless, I found three steps under an eave and a single closed door. There was no sign of light inside, and the alley ended right there.

"It’s definitely closed," one of my companions said.

"No." I shook my head and pointed the light at the tip of my scabbard toward the ground. "Look at the stairs. The edges aren't so bad, but the middle is wet with muddy water. That means this place was open until just a moment ago, and someone was coming and going."

"Then?"

"It means we were right."

Thomas probably came to this shop. He likely gave them money or something to get the people in the shop on his side—and then the two from group two arrived. The two were captured—and Thomas and the shop people realized that there were more than just two pursuers. So they hurriedly closed the shop and were now holding their breath.

But their carelessness regarding the ground was their undoing. I chanted a spell under my breath.

"Damu brass!"

With one spell, I blasted the lock, kicked the door open, and stepped into the shop! Instantly, the darkness stirred!

Judging by the presences, there were fewer than ten people hiding.

"You can't run anymore, Thomas!" I yelled, holding up the light.

Suddenly!

"Doriaaaaah!"

A man jumped out from the shadows nearby and swung something at me! At the same time, I gave my short sword a flick! The glowing scabbard slipped off and flew toward the back of the shop. The moment the man's eyes reflexively followed the light, I stepped in while chanting a spell.

Thud!

I drove the pommel of the sword into the man's jaw! The man fell backward and collapsed.

"Gyaaa!"

"He got him!"

The men hiding in the shop cried out one after another. Among them was a small groan that belonged to Thomas!

Found you!

The magical light on the scabbard faintly illuminated the inside of the shop. Walls, pillars stained with resin, and tables. There were about ten men scattered about. At the back of the shop, the two men from the search party were lying on the floor.

My spell was ready!

"Burst Rondo!"

Countless flames flashed, followed by explosions and overlapping screams! As I expected, about eleven people were knocked down instantly, and the men were thrown into a panic. Before they could recover from the shock, I continued.

The men fled toward the back of the shop, screaming in confusion! Of course, I had no intention of letting them go!

"Wait!"

I gave chase at a jog, which only panicked the men further. They scrambled over the counter and through a small kitchen, pushing and shoving at the back door. Among them, I spotted Thomas's face.

Good. I had him cornered.

"Don't come any closer! Stay back!"

One terrified man threw cups and wooden plates at me, but they didn't have enough power to bother dodging, nor did they even hit me. This spell, which caused many small explosions, looked flashy but had low power. If it hit directly, it would hurt a bit, and it might ignite some scrap paper around the shop, but that was about it.

However, for amateurs, it was a sufficient threat. In fact, just because an attack spell had been fired...

"S-she’s shooting at us!"

"Crap, this girl is dangerous!"

"D-do you plan to kill us!?"

I continued walking with a steady pace while chanting a spell under my breath.

"DON'T COME ANY CLOSER!"

The man who had been throwing things screamed and snatched up a nearby cloth sack.

What was that? Before I could react, the man threw it at me! The contents of the bag scattered in the air, and the next moment, an explosion rocked the shop!

(Exorcism as Planned: To be continued!)

Next Time Preview

Because she failed to take him down at first, Lina let Thomas get away! Will she be able to corner Thomas after all?! And then, she'll find some excuse to give the Claon father and son a piece of her mind! (Though I'm the one writing this, won't Phibrizzo fans be mad at me?!) Anyway, the next episode: "Exorcism as Planned" Part Two! Can she pull it off!?

Exorcism as Planned [Part Two]

Lina Inverse was asked by Kalman, the head of the prestigious Claon family in Mytilcan City, to exorcise a demon possessing his son, Thomas! However, upon hearing the story, the "possession" was just a pack of lies Thomas told to escape the consequences of his own mischief! Furthermore, Kalman believed it and had been using his wealth and power to hush up Thomas's bad behavior! Lina accepted the request to teach the foolish pair a lesson, but that night, Thomas escaped from the mansion! Just as she found Thomas in a city tavern and thought she had him cornered, an explosion rocked the shop!

With a small *clack*, a piece of wood rolled away. When I sat up and looked around, things were blown everywhere, and the shop—which hadn't been tidy to begin with—now looked more like a junk yard. Fortunately, the explosion wasn't that large.

"Are you alright!?"

One of the pursuit team members rushed into the shop and called out. My ears were acting up from the blast, so his voice sounded a bit muffled.

"Yeah. I'm fine. I ducked instantly. It wasn't that big of an explosion anyway."

Even my own voice sounded like it was echoing strangely as I stood up.

"Was that your attack magic just now, Lina-san?"

At the other man's question, I shook my head. "Someone scattered flour."

Ah. The echo was starting to fade.

"Flour...?"

I nodded at the man as he frowned.

"That's right. When flammable dust—like flour—is scattered thickly in the air and meets a spark, it can cause an explosion. Well, that one wasn't particularly large, though."

The "spark," needless to say, had been the embers from the *Burst Rondo* I had fired off as a threat. Knowing what was coming, I had ducked instantly, but the men who had been bottlenecked at the back door were now buried under cooking utensils, dishes, and jars of ingredients, groaning in a heap.

"We've found the men from group two!" a voice called out from inside the shop, reporting the discovery of our captured comrades.

After a brief pause: "The driver Master Thomas took with him is here too! But..."

The number of people was strangely small, and more importantly, Thomas—who I was sure I'd seen a moment ago—was nowhere to be found.

No way.

"Thomas should have been here! Search the area and see if he's buried under something!" I barked at the two men. I trampled over scattered goods and buried thugs, poking my head out through the half-broken back door.

But all I found there was an alley and dark rain. Beyond the ring of light leaking from the shop, there was only pitch black. I looked at the ground for footprints, but there was nothing but muddy puddles splashing in the rain.

"I have to report... Master Thomas... is nowhere to be found..."

The subsequent report confirmed it: I had let Thomas get away.

"To be honest, the situation is bad," I said, starting the conversation the moment Kalman took his seat across the table.

After losing Thomas last night, I had returned to the mansion to catch some sleep before regrouping. When I woke up, I was in the same room where I had first spoken

to Kalman. The sky outside the window was covered in clouds, and while it looked like it could pour again at any moment, the rain had at least paused for now.

The rain had stopped. I had hurriedly eaten breakfast—and since the croissants were delicious, I ate every single one in the mansion—and then I urgently summoned Kalman.

Only three people were in the room: me, Kalman, and the butler, Reeves, standing behind him.

"Bad?" Kalman asked with an anxious expression.

I gave a single nod. "The rain stopped. That means there's a possibility Thomas will try to escape outside the city."

"No, no," he replied with a half-smile at my suggestion. "Not Thomas. He would never choose to leave his parents and live on his own."

Complete denial of his son's independence!? "Uh, well, how should I put this... For Thomas, the question is which he hates more: living alone with the money he stole, or coming back here to receive my 'Full Course Exorcism.' When you look at it that way, there's a good chance he'll flee the city."

"...I... I see..." He furrowed his brow. "Now that you mention it, Thomas does hate pain... In fact, when he was a child, he once ran away to the next town just because he didn't want medicine applied to a sting..."

"I... can't tell if that means he has guts or not... Anyway, as further evidence: we found the driver Thomas took, but we haven't found the carriage. This means he's secured a means of transport for his escape."

Realizing the situation at last, Kalman's face hardened visibly. "Then Thomas might really leave the city...! What are you going to do if that happens!?"

"I understand. We'll discuss the location of responsibility and the accompanying financial settlement later!"

"What? A separate fee?"

"Regardless, the priority right now is finding Thomas! I've questioned the group that was harboring him last night... but they were just a bunch of kids hanging around him for the fun of it and because he was throwing money around. They didn't know

anything except nicknames and first names. I couldn't get anything useful. If you know anything about Thomas's social circle, I need you to tell me."

At my request, the butler bowed deeply.

"If it's the young master's usual haunts, we can find out by speaking to the driver. However, as for his social circle, it may take some time to investigate."

Of course, we didn't have time for that.

"In that case, we have no choice but to use human-wave tactics! Now is the time to use your... 'shady' network to find Thomas!"

"Shady? That's a bit much..."

"Anyway! Deploy your people and make sure he doesn't leave the city! That is the priority! A total blockade! If we fall behind here, Thomas will leave the city and might never come back! Do you really want that!?"

"No, that would be a problem..."

"Right?? So for now, set aside the details and make a snap decision! He might be trying to leave the city even as we speak! There's no time to dawdle!"

"...U-understood. Reeves, make the arrangements immediately!"

Under my pressure, Kalman nodded weakly.

"As you wish," the butler replied. As he turned to leave, I called out, "Wait a second!"

He stopped.

"I'll leave the blocking of escape routes to you, but I'll handle the search directions for a separate fee from the exorcism!"

"A separate fee? I didn't ask for such a thing."

Tch! I thought I'd said it casually enough, but he noticed. However! I certainly didn't plan to back down here! I leaned forward, putting pressure on him.

"I feel like... I'm being cheated somehow..."

"Oh, nonsense. It's just a management fee for the operation."

"W-well, alright."

Yes, I was cheating him. To make sure he didn't realize it, I began barking out orders efficiently.

"Then it's settled! First, the search structure. It's too inconvenient to coordinate everything from here. We need a makeshift headquarters in the center of the city... Let's use the inn where I was staying. Make the arrangements! I'll go there with a few messengers, but since there's a chance Thomas might come back here, you and at least a few others should stay here! Let's move!"

"U-understood."

"Understood, Miss."

The two of them nodded.

Just you wait, Thomas! Making me go through all this extra trouble! I'm going to catch you right away and make you regret not just taking your exorcism like a man!

With a burning fighting spirit hidden in my heart, I began the operation!

The city after the rain was bustling, a complete change from before. People were moving about the streets, finally liberated from the long downpour. Normally, it would have been a peaceful moment. However...

Groups of thuggish-looking men were conspicuously rushing through the streets, splashing mud and creating an ominous atmosphere. Needless to say, these were the men under Kalman's influence. They called out to search for Thomas. It seemed Kalman's reach was even greater than I had imagined.

I watched the city from the window of the eatery on the first floor of the inn that served as our headquarters. I had already settled things with the innkeeper lady—stating that all bills were to be sent to Kalman—but since then, she had been completely keeping her distance from me.

I was sitting at a window-side table with two servants from the mansion who were acting as messengers, sipping ordered juice and chatting, when...

SLAM!

It was before noon when the front door swung open with a loud noise. A man who looked every bit the small-time crook stood there, breathing heavily. He scanned the room and locked eyes with us. Well, there weren't any other customers besides us anyway.

The man ran toward us. "A-Are you... Lina-onne-san? From Master Kalman's place!?"

onee-san? (Big sister?) The man was clearly at least ten years older than me.

"I suppose," I said, nodding for the time being.

I pointed to the two messengers. "You, come with me. You, stay here for backup."

I stood up and turned to the thuggish man. "Now then, shall we have you show us the way?"

"Yeah. Follow me."

Led by him, I started to leave the shop, but then I remembered something and called out to the innkeeper lady.

"Hey, lady! Put the bill for all the food and drink on the Claon family's tab, just like I said!"

"Y-yes!" came the reply, filled with tension and fear.

Hmm... I bet to her, I look exactly like the thug who just came to fetch me.

Feeling a bit annoyed, I left the inn behind.

On the outskirts of the city stood a single, masterless stable. That old brick building was where Thomas and his companions were hiding. The reason the location was discovered was simple: one of Thomas's friends, dressed in his full thug-style attire, had gone to a nearby shop to buy groceries.

His appearance, so ill-suited for the task, had stuck in the shopkeeper's memory. Furthermore, because he had left footprints in the mud after the rain, it wasn't even a matter of a blunder—they just hadn't been thinking at all.

As I listened to this explanation on the way to the site, we eventually arrived. It was a relatively large, dilapidated building. Surrounding it were about twenty men in total, clustered in small groups here and there. Needless to say, they were the men Kalman

had mobilized, and their aura made it obvious they weren't exactly law-abiding citizens.

Among the men gathered nearby was a bald man with a scar on his cheek who looked like a well-groomed bandit chief. He glanced at the thug who had guided me.

"Is this the person?"

"Yeah. No mistake."

At the thug's answer, the scarred bald man bowed to me. "I recognized the name immediately. I've heard the rumors. You're Lina Inverse, the 'Killer of a Thousand,' aren't you?"

"Wait a second! 'Killer of a Thousand'? Don't go spreading such nasty rumors."

"I heard the rumor that the number of bandits you've hunted down exceeds a thousand. Was I wrong?"

Asked in return, I was momentarily at a loss for words. "...Well... I don't really remember the exact number... I mean, you guys don't remember every piece of bread you've ever eaten, do you?"

I thought it was a very clear analogy, but everyone around me—including one of the messengers I'd brought—inexplicably twitched and pulled away.

"M-my apologies. Please forgive my prying. S-so, about that... it was all well and good that we found their hideout, but things have become quite troublesome. To be honest, we're at a loss for how to handle it."

He spoke with an oddly humble attitude. Before I could even ask what was "troublesome," someone shouted from the building.

"Someone just came, didn't they!? What are you thinking!? I told you to bring a carriage and money! If you mess with us, we'll seriously kill Thomas!"

"W-w-wait! Stop it, Franz! Don't wave that knife around! Calm down! Someone help me, Daddy!"

"Ah."

What I heard from the building were the voices of the gang and Thomas's screams. I see. I understood perfectly.

In other words, the group Thomas was hanging out with realized that Kalman was serious. They panicked, thinking that while Thomas might be fine, they themselves wouldn't get away scot-free. In their desperation, they decided to take Thomas hostage to secure their escape.

"It would be easy to rush in and take down those brats, but with Master Claon's son taken hostage... we were hoping for your wisdom, Lina-san..."

"Fireball."

BOOOOOOM!

A single explosion blew away the outer wall of the stable!

"Uwaaaaaagh!?" "Wh-what!?"

A chorus of confused screams erupted from inside the building.

Alright, one more push! I immediately began my next spell—

"Wait!"

"What are you doing!?"

The messenger and the scarred bald man screamed at me in succession just as I started chanting.

"Master Thomas is being held hostage!"

"Are you trying to kill him!?"

"I'm right here too!!"

The messenger yelled, but of course, I already knew that. In these situations, if you let the other side think the hostage is effective, they'll only get more arrogant. Therefore, you have to show a posture that ignores the hostage entirely, terrifying the opponent and seizing the initiative!

To do that, you just have to keep piling on the pressure until their spirit breaks from fear! I felt like I probably should have explained this before firing, but when you see a

bunch of villainous faces right in front of you, the urge to chant an attack spell is just a maiden's defensive instinct. Besides, explaining was a hassle.

And once I'd started, there was no point in stopping!

"If anything happens to Thomas, imagine what will happen to us later...!"

I ignored the scarred bald man's continued protests.

"Damu brass!"

F-WHOOM!

Another one hit the stable!

"It's coming again!?"

"Thomas, you stop her!"

"No way, I can't, it's impossible!"

Confused screams erupted from inside again. The attack continued.

Before I could even begin to chant the next spell, the scarred, hairless man lunged at me! My foot met his face in a counter-strike that exploded against him.

The man went down hard. The air in the vicinity seemed to freeze with the sound of the impact.

Ah. Oops. I did it again. Having a villainous face close in on me like that triggered a spinal reflex, and I just sort of let the counter fly... oh well. They say there is no high or low among villains; they are all equally worthless.

The people around me, however, didn't seem ready to let it go with a simple "oh well."

"Wh... what are you doing!?"

"How dare you do that to the boss!"

They got riled up and came at me one after another, but in the end, they were just a handful of street thugs. Between kicks, palm strikes, and a few rocks I picked up, I

took them all down in no time at all. Soon, the only one left standing near me was the messenger, who was completely speechless.

The other groups surrounding the stable from a distance were flustered by what they saw, but I ignored them too.

"Damu Brass!"

A third scream came from inside following the third attack. It was about time for the group inside to give up.

However, "What do you think you're doing!?" the men who had been surrounding the place shouted at me.

I had no intention of explaining myself to every single one of them. While I ignored them and began chanting the next spell, someone gave an order.

"Hey! That woman is dangerous! She's not sane! Stop her!"

The men broke their formation and charged toward me! I would have liked to argue that this was all a tragic misunderstanding, but they probably wouldn't have listened. If that was the case, there was only one thing I could do.

Do you gentlemen happen to know the very convenient phrase "self-defense"?

I turned toward the group and slowly took a fighting stance. The battle... or rather, the self-defense... didn't last very long. By the time I had created a few small craters in the ground, everyone was face-down on the earth. Only the messenger I had brought with me remained, standing dazed beside me.

I inhaled deeply to call out to them, but at that moment, a clattering, thundering noise erupted from the stable! From where I stood, I couldn't see what was happening, but then I remembered: the carriage Thomas used to leave the mansion had never been found.

It meant they were planning to use this opportunity, while the surroundings were clear, to escape somewhere in the carriage. They must have kept Thomas with them as a hostage! They probably had the carriage hidden inside the stable. If that was the case, I couldn't let them get away!

I chanted a spell under my breath.

"Ray Wing!"

I used the spell for high-speed flight and took to the air! I realized I was leaving the messenger behind, but oh well! As I rounded the stable, I saw the back of the escaping carriage! I poured my will into increasing my speed and pulled up alongside the right side of the vehicle from behind.

A young man sat on the driver's box, desperately lashing the whip. I caught a glimpse of Thomas's face through the carriage window. There were several others inside as well.

The man on the driver's box noticed me flying alongside him on the right! His face twisted in terror as he lashed the whip toward me, but it didn't even reach.

Recognizing that his efforts were useless, the man manipulated the reins and forced the carriage into a sharp left turn at the corner of the street! I stayed glued to the back of the carriage, chasing them from the left side!

After going on like that for a while, I saw my opening and let the carriage pull away slightly—keeping them at a distance where they were neither too close nor too far. We were now racing through a sparse area on the outskirts of the city center. Fields, vacant lots, and groves of trees began to stand out.

Eventually, a large mansion appeared ahead, nestled among cedar trees. I couldn't see the driver's expression from where I was, but he must have realized it by now: he had been successfully baited and lured right back to the Claon estate.

But even if he realized it, it was too late! This was a straight, one-way road leading to the mansion! At this speed, if they veered off the road, a rollover was inevitable! Knowing I was right behind them, they could neither stop nor turn back!

The carriage headed for the mansion without slowing down. Perhaps they had grown desperate, or perhaps they thought I wouldn't do anything reckless so close to the house!

However—too naive!

I cancelled the high-speed flight spell and landed a short distance from the mansion. I took aim and chanted the spell that could even slaughter a dragon.

"DRAGON SLAVE!"

The crimson light scattered the power of destruction, trampling the earth and the wind! Naturally, I didn't hit the mansion or the carriage directly. I aimed for an empty spot. Even so, it was more than enough to blow out the windows of the house and the carriage.

By the time the echoes of the explosion faded into the mountains, I started walking toward the overturned carriage. The man who had been on the driver's box was lying unconscious some distance away.

Then, the carriage door swung open with a bang, and none other than Thomas crawled out, stumbling.

"Ugh... uugh... Aah!?"

He pulled himself up and cried out as he looked at his damaged home. Sensing my presence, he turned around, spotted me, and let out an even louder scream before bolting toward the house!

"NUWAAAAAAAAAAAA!?"

His pace was terribly slow, hindered by shock and terror. I followed the fleeing Thomas at a leisurely gait.

"Uwa, uwa, uwawawawa!?"

He screamed as he ran through the broken front door into the mansion. I followed him through the entrance and into the hall.

"Th... Thomas!? What happened!? What is going on!?"

There was Kalman, standing dazed by the damage to his home, and Thomas, who was clinging to him. The butler and the other servants had gathered as well, likely startled by the explosion.

Perfect. The process had been a bit different from my original plan, but the result wasn't bad! The rest depended on my silver tongue!

Kalman looked back and forth between the clinging Thomas and me with a confused expression. "L-Lina-san, what on earth is...!"

I answered coldly. "What on earth? I'm exorcising the demon possessing Thomas."

At my declaration, Thomas stayed hidden behind Kalman, clinging to him. "W-Wait! What are you talking about!? I'm not possessed by any demon!"

"You said it yourself. You were possessed by a demon. That all your previous rotten behavior was the demon's fault."

"Th-that was obviously a lie! I'm not possessed!"

"Why tell such a lie?"

"B-Because Pops started saying he was going to disown me... it's his fault!"

"Thomas, you...!"

Kalman's face showed deep agitation at hearing his son confess to the lie. I mean, he was seriously slow to realize it was a lie! I held back the urge to point that out and instead shook my head with a cold expression.

"No. You are possessed."

"I'm telling you, I'm not!"

"I've heard your reputation in town," I said. "How you've acted selfishly all this time, and how the bill for it has always been settled by your father's power. I'm not saying power itself is evil. But a life spent being captivated by it and using it selfishly results in people whispering behind your back and being taken hostage by the very people you thought were your friends. It's only natural. The thing people respect isn't you—it's your father's power."

"Guh..." Thomas groaned, looking pained as if I'd struck a nerve.

"You've spoiled yourself on your parent, and you've lost sight of the most important thing: yourself. That is what it means to be possessed by the demon of a heart that relies on a parent's power."

In the back, the butler had a look on his face that suggested I was one to talk, given how I did whatever I wanted with the power of attack spells, but I set that aside.

"Even if you think you've hushed things up with money and power, there are certainly people out there who resent you. If you continue to act selfishly, those people will only increase. Have you ever thought about this? What if someone who hates you snaps and hires an assassin? And what if that assassin has skills comparable to mine?"

Thomas’s eyes started to well up. I gave a casual shrug. "I'm just saying 'what if.' Oh, but just so you know, if I felt like it, I could blow up everyone along with this mansion with a single attack spell." The crowd stirred at my ominous declaration.

"I'm not the one sowing the seeds of resentment against you. But depending on the situation, what do you think the result would be? It would be similar to what's happening now, wouldn't it? No matter where you run, you'd be found. The thugs under your influence would be defeated. The people you thought were your friends would abandon you and corner you. Against an opponent who intends to kill you, money and power won't be of any use. Once a blade is pressed against your throat, you'll be helpless."

"Th-then what should I...!"

"What do you think you should do?" I shot back instantly.

With a desperate expression, Thomas cried out, "I... I get it! I was wrong! I won't act selfishly anymore! From now on, I'll think about other people and how I might be a nuisance! So...!"

Alright. This man had finally learned his lesson. However, people of this type tend to forget the heat once it passes the throat and do the same thing all over again.

Therefore, I looked him straight in the eye to drive the point home one last time.

"If you understand, then I will leave. But remember this. If you continue to act selfishly, a second or third Lina Inverse will eventually appear before you."

As Thomas nodded frantically, I shifted my gaze to Kalman.

"And you too, Kalman-san. Until now, you thought you were following up on Thomas's actions out of a heart that wanted to protect your child. But in the end, that only increased Thomas's selfishness and ruined his reputation. Think long and hard about that." Kalman groaned and nodded.

"Well, if both father and son understand that much, then the Lina Inverse style 'Exorcism' is successfully concluded. Is that sufficient, Kalman-san?"

"Yes… I see now that... because our thoughts as father and son were so lacking, we have put you to much trouble."

As he bowed his head, I flashed a radiant smile.

"Not at all, not at all. So, regarding that, for the remainder of the exorcism fee, plus the additional handling fee for the trouble caused by letting Thomas escape the room, and the search fee... about sixty gold coins in total should be fine. I'll take that right now."

"EEEEEH!?"

Kalman let out a cry of surprise at my very reasonable bill, looking back and forth between the broken windows of the mansion and me.

"...Um... did we have a conversation about me covering all the household damage expenses too...?"

"Yep! ♪"

My smile didn't waver for a second. He looked like he wanted to say something for a moment, but eventually, with a face of resignation, he turned on his heel and headed to his room to get the money.

That retreating back of his looked somehow deeply sorrowful.

I felt as though the air after the rain had stopped was much clearer than usual. Although the highway leading to the next town was still muddy, such things didn't matter to me at the moment.

Immediately after receiving the remainder of the commission fee from Kalman, I had left the city behind and set out on my usual aimless journey. While there were still more clouds than blue patches in the sky, I figured it would eventually clear up. Looking up at the slivers of blue peeking through, I thought back on the Claon father and son.

Right about now, the thugs I beat up were probably storming Kalman’s place to lodge their complaints. I had absolutely no desire to be sucked into that troublesome mess, which was exactly why I had high-tailed it out of town. Those two were definitely in a bind.

With those thoughts in mind, I traveled down the post-rain highway with a light heart.

(Exorcism as Planned: End)

The Guardians of the Pharmaceuticals

Crimson flames scorched the night sky. Several screams echoed and then faded. The embers of the attack spell I had fired flickered in the night, illuminating about ten bandits who were rolling around and twitching on the ground. A short distance away stood a dilapidated house that served as their hideout.

The specialty dish I had ordered at the inn had been out of stock; holding back my tears, I had sprinted through the night and found these bandits in the nearby mountains to beat up and strip of their valuables.

"Now then," I said.

It was a page of youth typical for a naive teenager. I scanned the surroundings, intending to shake down the fallen men for the location of their treasure, when—*Whish!*

Along with the sound of the wind being sliced, the fire in a nearby bush that had been flickering died out instantly. That was a cold-based spell! Did the bandits have a sorcerer among them!?

I scanned the area, looking toward the direction the strike had come from, and saw a white shadow standing in the darkness, bathed in the moonlight filtering through the trees! It was a white robe with a pattern I had seen some time ago. In its right hand was a glint of light reflecting the moon—likely a knife. A hood pulled low hid the figure's face in shadow.

"Would you mind not using fire?"

The voice from the white shadow was female. While measuring the distance between us, I replied, "Seems like you've shown up a bit too late. Your buddies are already all out cold."

At my words, the white figure wavered slightly. She slowly lowered the weapon in her right hand. "That voice... could it be, Lina-san?"

As I stood there letting out a dumbfounded sound, the other person lowered her hood with her left hand. Her spilled-out golden hair shone in the moonlight. She looked slightly older than me. I recognized that face.

"Hastis!" I cried out.

This Hastis was one of the pharmaceutical managers I had met when I was commissioned by the Sorcerer's Association a while back. She was a bit of a troubled medicine geek who loved the contents of the large medicine chest on her back more than anything else.

"What are you doing in a place like this?" I asked, mixing familiarity with suspicion. Although it was two sizes smaller than before, she was still carrying a medicine chest on her back. The Hastis I knew wouldn't have set foot in a bandit den while carrying medicine.

Hastis smiled at my question. She tucked the glowing object in her right hand—a glass medicine stirring rod reflecting the moonlight—into her robes.

"Yes. Actually—"

"Miss Hastis!"

A voice cut off her answer as four men dressed exactly like Hastis leaped out from the depths of the darkness! They came to a halt on either side of her, leveling iron rods toward me.

"Wait. There is no need for concern. She isn't an enemy," Hastis said, calming the men with a steady voice. "This is Lina Inverse-san, someone I met through work before. I'll introduce you later; for now, first, extinguish the surrounding fires and bind the bandits so they can't move. Some might be pretending to be unconscious, so please be careful."

"Yes, ma'am!"

The men answered her instructions. Working in pairs, they either chanted cold spells to put out the fires or began the task of binding the limbs of the fallen bandits.

I watched this scene with wide eyes. "Hastis... did you get a promotion or something?" I asked with a hint of bewilderment.

When I met her before, she was the apprentice of a certain pharmaceutical manager and had a very "rookie" feel to her. Seeing her briskly giving orders to grown men who seemed to be her subordinates felt decidedly out of place, even if some time had passed.

"Yes," Hastis said with a wry smile. "A promotion... I wonder? Actually, I'm currently working for the newly established Magic Pharmaceutical Special Investigation Task Force."

"Magic Pharmaceutical Special Investigation Task Force?"

My eyes went wide at the unfamiliar name. She nodded firmly. "Needless to say, there are quite a few people who try to steal magic pharmaceuticals."

Magic medicines used by sorcerers for various experiments and rituals are generally expensive. Cheap ones have their price, but the expensive ones have no ceiling. There are some that would allow you to live a normal life for the rest of your days even if sold at a bargain price. Cases of thieves or sorcerers strapped for cash trying to steal someone else's magic pharmaceuticals are endless.

"Until now, the reality was that once they were stolen, people gave up on them. There were cases where mercenaries were hired for recovery, but when you rely on people who don't know how to handle medicine, they often ruin them through rough handling. Therefore, led by Kinnal City where we are based, the Magic Pharmaceutical Special Investigation Task Force was newly established as an organization to conduct follow-up investigations and recovery of stolen magic medicines. It's an organization where sorcerers confident in their skills and those knowledgeable in medicine management form teams to track and recover stolen goods."

"I see..." I chuckled.

Whether that could be called a "promotion" was a bit debatable. You could also interpret it as her simply being saddled with dangerous field work. Judging from the fact that Hastis was assigned the leader role, I could guess the caliber of the four men working around her. If you looked at it pessimistically, you could say they established a department as a "nothing to lose" move and gathered people they didn't mind using as pawns. Of course, the story would change once they achieved some results.

"I was chosen as a member of that task force, and because I have knowledge of medicine management, I was entrusted with acting as the leader. A while ago, some magic pharmaceuticals were stolen by these bandits during transport. Recovering

those medicines was our first mission... and, well... this is a bit presumptuous, but... I have a request..."

I knew what she wanted to say. "You want me to hand over the magic pharmaceuticals these guys have, right?"

"Ah... yes..." Hastis said in a small voice.

To be honest, since I was the one who defeated the bandits, I wanted to claim all the treasure as mine. The stolen magic medicine was probably incredibly expensive. After all, it was considered worth mobilizing five people to recover, even if they seemed like a motley crew.

However, it wasn't a bad idea to put the Sorcerer's Association in my debt through Hastis. Someday, when I needed some magic medicine, I might be able to get it cheaper through that connection. Conversely, if I beat up Hastis and the others right here and refused to hand over the medicine, it would only lead to trouble later.

"Can't be helped, I guess. Since that's the situation, if these guys have the magic medicine, I'll hand it over to you. Also, you can go ahead and report that the resolution was your own achievement. I won't say something like 'I defeated the bandits, so give me a cut of the reward for the medicine,' so don't worry. In exchange, make sure the report mentions that there was 'goodwill' cooperation from me. Also, the rest of the bandits' treasure belongs to me."

"Thank you so much! That really helps!" Hastis smiled.

That should have been the end of the conversation—provided the bandits actually had the stolen medicine.

"We sold it!"

The voice of one of the bandits echoed in the night sky. The fires had been extinguished, magical lights had been lit in the area, and when they questioned the tied-up bandits—who had been woken up—about the location of the stolen medicine, that was the answer they got.

The expressions of the task force members standing around turned agitated. I, however, kept my expression unchanged and spoke to the first tied-up bandit.

"If that's a lie—and we find the medicine later when we search your belongings and the hideout—do you have any idea what's going to happen to you?"

"I... I know... I'm not about to stake my life on a makeshift lie. It's not a lie. We already sold the medicine."

"You sold it? To whom!?" Hastis demanded, pressing in with a demonic expression.

The bandit answered bluntly. "I don't know..."

"There's no way you don't know, is there!?"

"I'm telling you, I don't—"

"Now, now. Calm down."

I cut in and pulled the heated Hastis back. With the moon at my back, I looked down at the bandit with a radiant smile.

"You see this kind of scene a lot in ballads and such, don't you? Don't you know it? The development where someone is asked something, and as soon as they answer 'I don't know,' the other person says 'Tch. Useless,' and then—*Slash!*"

"Ugh..." The bandit looked up at me, his face twitching.

"B-But... there's also the pattern where as soon as you tell them what you know, they say 'Thanks,' and then—*Slash!*"

"Ah. That happens too. So, which development do you prefer?"

"Wh-? Wait a second! Is the 'Slash' part a guaranteed thing!?"

While he was saying that, Hastis spoke up tentatively from the side. "...U-Um, Lina-san... that... that's intimidation."

"Yes, it's intimidation. So?"

"If you're aware of it, then fine."

"It's not fine! Stop her!"

I looked at the bandit, who was now nearly in tears, and adopted a thinking posture.

"What should I do? If I do the 'Slash' thing, maintaining my sword afterward is such a pain. But for the second person and beyond..."
"Most people see the perks of being honest after a drop in altitude," I muttered loudly enough to be overheard, and the man hurriedly replied, "W-Wait, just listen to me! I never said I wouldn't talk! It was the other side who came to us with the request!"

"The other side?"

Hastis and I spoke in unison. The man nodded vigorously.

"Y-Yeah. It's not like we're cooped up in the mountains all the time. Once we get some gold in our hands, we clean ourselves up a bit, head into town, and eat, drink, and play. A little while ago, while we were drinking at our usual spot, he showed up."

In the dead of night, in the heart of the mountains, the bandit began his tale.

"It was probably a fake name," he said. "He was the one who approached us. He wore a black cloak and hood; he looked less like a sorcerer and more like someone who just didn't want to be seen. A stuck-up blonde brat... he suddenly piled gold coins on our table and said he had a job he wanted to ask of us."

"---That job... don't tell me it was---"

At Hastis's words, the bandit gave a large nod. "Yeah. He told us that at a certain time, on this specific road, a certain group of people would pass by, so we were to ambush them and steal the medicine they were carrying to give to him. He said he'd pay even more if we succeeded. We finished the job just like he said, and exactly at noon today, we sold the medicine to him."

Hastis and I exchanged looks. The story was consistent, and based on his manner of speaking, he didn't seem to be lying.

"I'll believe you for now. And? His name?" I asked, and the bandit gave a wry smile.

"I'm telling ya. Also, give me the name of the town and the shop where you met him."

"It's the town of Perrier to the west. There's a tavern called the 'Iron Hammer' in a back alley of the downtown district. He called himself... Flask, or something like that."

A flask was a bottle used for mixing chemicals. It was certainly a blatantly obvious pseudonym, but—

"Flask, you say!"

It was Hastis who reacted to that fake name.

"Wait, Hastis. Just because it's the same name as a mixing bottle doesn't mean you need to get that excited—"

"No!" she shouted, her voice sharpening. "I have an idea of who that name belongs to! The one who showed me hell... the one who tore my family to pieces was a man calling himself Flask!"

While I was bewildered by the heavy words that had suddenly burst out, she looked up at the night sky and began to speak.

"My father and mother were pharmaceutical managers just like me."

"You said your family was torn to pieces...?"

"The three of us spent our peaceful days at home, savoring the color, luster, and viscosity of our stockpiled medicines, or sniffing the scent of the drugs in a trance..."

I got the feeling that her definition of "peaceful" was a bit off, but I kept quiet.

"But about two years ago! A single thief broke into our home and made off with all the magic medicines that had the best scents and lusters! Among them was the magic medicine my father and mother cherished most. Having lost their precious medicine, my parents disappeared from the house in their despair..."

"They got that depressed over it!?"

I couldn't understand that feeling at all, but well, it was certainly a major incident. Hastis's eyes grew moist.

"Even now, I occasionally receive postcards from their travels..."

"Then they're doing fine, aren't they?"

Wasn't that just a "broken heart trip" that had gradually turned into a fun vacation?

"I also had my own favorite medicine stolen, and I suffered withdrawal symptoms for a while. Honestly, we're a bit uneasy on our own, but if you could lend us your strength,"

"Um. The way you're putting it makes it sound like you were doing illegal drugs. Well… anyways. First, we need to confirm if what this guy is saying is true..."

"---Thank you so much!"

Since things had turned out this way, I was already on board. And so, I ended up lending a hand in recovering the stolen medicine. Hastis flashed a radiant smile.

A high wall surrounded the grounds. From the iron-grated gate, it was a bit of a walk to the entrance of the mansion. I, Hastis, and the four special task force members stood before that gate.

Last night, after hearing stories from the other bandits and checking their belongings and hideout, it seemed the story was true. We tied the bandits to a nearby tree, and today at dawn, we arrived here in the town of Perrier. The town was of a decent size and even had a small Sorcerer's Association.

We reported to the officials that we had bound the bandits in the mountains, and then we began our inquiries regarding the man calling himself Flask.

However, even when I handed some coins to the owner of the shop the bandits had frequented and described the man's appearance, the only answer I got was a stubborn refusal to admit to knowing anything. So, I changed locations and went around asking who held power on both the front and back sides of this town.

The name that came up was Metra Reinforce. In other words, the master of this mansion. According to the rumors, this man was interested in the magical arts but had almost zero talent as a sorcerer, though he apparently had a personal sorcerer who also served as his teacher. Furthermore, according to Hastis, the magic medicine stolen by the bandits had been scheduled to be delivered here.

On the way, I had given the others instructions on how to move. With this, various things were prepared. All that was left was to wait for the curtain to rise.

As we approached the gate of the mansion, a man who looked a bit too thuggish to be called a gatekeeper spoke to us. "What do you want?"

I smiled and said, "If you tell Master Metra that 'a problem was found with the quality of the magic medicine delivered the other day,' he'll understand."

The gatekeeper furrowed his brow. "...And your name?"

"He'll understand if you just tell him that."

I repeated the same words with a smile.

"I can't deliver a message like that."

"Then please prepare to be scolded later."

When I turned to leave, the gatekeeper hurriedly raised his voice. "---Wait!"

I stopped and turned around; the gatekeeper grumbled, "Wait there," and headed toward the mansion. In the end, he didn't even ask my name—which meant that people who couldn't exactly go around openly using their names frequented this mansion as well.

After waiting for a while, the man eventually returned. "He'll see you. Get in." He opened the iron gate with a creak.

Following the man's guidance, we walked along the approach paved with white gravel and stepped through the entrance door. It was a large entrance hall. A deep blue carpet lay on the floor, and four large marble columns pierced through the open ceiling. There were large doors straight ahead and to the left and right.

Stairs from the left and right of the entrance extended to the second floor, connecting to a balcony-like area looking down below. There was another large door there. It was exactly the kind of place where a villain would emerge from the back door and look down upon us.

"To the back," the guide urged, and we moved further in. Once the man behind us closed the entrance door, there was a *clack* as he locked it. Hastis and the task force members showed signs of agitation, but for me, this was expected.

By the time we reached the middle of the entrance hall, the man behind us said, "Stop."

Then, the door on the second floor opened. I wondered if anyone heard my mutter: "See?"

A man in wine-colored clothes appeared, walked over to the railing, and looked down at us from the second floor in the expected fashion. He was about forty years old, maybe more. His hair was a white so pale I couldn't tell if it was silver or gray. He was lanky and thin, with dark skin that brought to mind some kind of illness.

However, he did not appear alone. Two others stood a few steps behind him. Both wore black cloaks and hoods—typical sorcerer style. His large, white-heavy eyes glared down at us coldly.

But I felt a strange sense of dissonance. The man on the right was about forty. He was fine. But the man on the left... his cloak and hood didn't sit right on him. How should I put it—rather than a sorcerer, he looked like someone who simply didn't want to be seen. He looked to be in his mid-twenties. From under the hood he wore, I could see golden hair.

If so, then this guy was probably—

"---I am---" leaning against the railing on the second floor and looking down at us, the man in wine-colored clothes spoke. "The master of this place, Metra Reinforce. So? You said there was a problem with the quality of the medicine—what are you talking about? No, first of all, who are you people?"

In response to the question, Hastis held up the identification card she pulled from her robes. "We are from the Kinnal City Sorcerer's Association, Magic Pharmaceutical Special Investigation Task Force. We have come today because there is something we wish to ask."

Metra maintained his cold gaze. "Task force, you said. But that's a different story from what I heard from the gatekeeper. I heard there was a problem with the quality of the magic medicine."

"It's the same thing."

From that point on, I took over the dialogue.

"How is it the same?"

"The magic medicine that was stolen by bandits during transport the other day... it was the medicine that was supposed to be delivered to you. The bandits told us that they handed it over to a man calling himself Flask in this town."

Metra's expression didn't change, nor did that of the blonde-haired robed figure to his left.

"We made inquiries in this town. We asked if anyone knew a man whose appearance matched that of this 'Flask.' The answer from everyone we asked was generally the same: 'I've never seen him.'"

"So there were no leads?"

"No, no. There were plenty," I said, shrugging with a wry smile. "This Flask's outfit consists of a black cloak and hood, and he's a young guy with blonde hair. Just like the person standing right next to you. Actually, there's even one right beside you. There must be plenty of people in similar outfits, yet no matter who I ask, the answer is always the same: 'I've never seen him.' No one even says, 'Come to think of it, there was a guy in similar clothes.' No matter how you look at it, it seems like everyone is being overly reactive, either out of consideration for someone or because they've been told to keep quiet. Because they don't want to make an enemy of someone powerful in this town. ---Come to think of it, Master Metra, you're quite a powerful figure in this town, aren't you?"

The man on the second floor remained silent. Perhaps he thought it wasn't worth answering. I continued regardless.

"You must have a lot of money, too. Since you seem to have ordered an incredibly expensive magic medicine from the Kinnal City Sorcerer's Association. Don't you think it's strange?"

"What is?" Metra's expression still hadn't broken.

"Because this town has its own Sorcerer's Association, even if it's small. In other words, there should be plenty of people in black cloaks and hoods, including young blonde guys. ...Of course, the medicine was stolen by bandits on the way to your place. Upon hearing that news, you canceled the order. Did you think you didn't want it anymore because it had been tainted? Or were you able to substitute it with something else? Or perhaps you obtained it much cheaper from somewhere else?

...But the bandits would surely be surprised. If they knew that the large sum of money they obtained was less than one percent of the actual price of the medicine."

"This still isn't connecting to the talk of the medicine's quality," said Metra.

"It's already connected. Long ago." I flashed a fearless smile and pointed at Metra. "There would be a huge problem if the quality of the magic medicine delivered by someone to a certain person's house was exactly the same quality as the medicine that was supposed to have been stolen. If even the medicine bottles were identical, that would be a major issue. Because it would mean that certain someone ordered expensive magic medicine, then used his underlings to move the bandits and have them steal the medicine during transport. If it failed, the down payment given to the bandits would be lost, but considering the price of the medicine, if it succeeded, it would be a huge profit. Not bad for a forward investment."

"Surely you don't intend to demand a search of my house based on such a mere imagination?"

"When did I ever say it was *mere* imagination?"

Well, in reality, it was just an imagination. I said this with a smile.

"Ho. So you have evidence?"

"I told you, didn't I? Even when I made inquiries in this town, the answer I got back was generally the same. That means I was also able to hear a story that *wasn't* like that."

This was also a lie. If we had taken the time to investigate, such a story might have surfaced, but unfortunately, we didn't have time. The bandits had handed over the magic medicine yesterday. If we let time pass, it might be used in some experiment. If that was the case, I had no choice but to bluff my way into making the opponent reveal their true colors.

"...I see. I understand. That's enough. Let's end this."

The moment Metra spoke, It seemed obvious they didn't know that pharmaceutical managers could use such techniques. Well, to be honest, I didn't know either until I met Hastis, and I wasn't sure if every pharmaceutical manager in the world could pull this off.

With a loud *thud*, the doors on both the left and right of the entrance hall swung wide open!

"What!?"

Staring back from the depths were men armed with clubs and knives. I wondered just how many voices cried out in shock at that moment. Several of the scattered arrows of cold air flew toward the men who were just about to rush out from those side doors.

Alright, they've shown their tails!

The arrows didn't score direct hits, but they slammed into the floor right in front of the men's feet, forcing them to stop. Simultaneously, the middle-aged sorcerer standing diagonally behind Metra stepped forward. He must have prepared the spell in advance.

"Freeze Arrow!"

He unleashed the spell toward us. Ten streaks of cold arrows rained down! But he was naive! He clearly didn't realize the true power of a pharmaceutical manager!

"Hastis!" I shouted, taking a step back as I began to chant a spell under my breath.

Their movements were sluggish, providing me with just enough time to finish my incantation.

"Damu Brass!"

Boom! The single blow pulverized the door directly in front of us on the first floor.

In my place, Hastis stepped forward. Shining at the tip of her right hand was a single stirring rod. To a layman, it looked like a harmless glass stick, but once gripped by a pharmaceutical manager, it could stir the very fabric of the world!

Hastis simply traced a circle in the empty air. To the observer, it looked like a minor gesture, but the atmosphere was stirred into a gale, blowing the incoming arrows of cold air to the left and right.

"Go!"

At my signal, the four task force members dashed toward the front door. My prior instructions were clear: if a commotion broke out, ignore everything and go find the

magic medicine. I figured the drugs would be in a basement where temperature control was easier, so I told them to look for a way down first. If we secured the medicine as evidence, Metra would have no way to talk his way out of it.

"Don't move!" Hastis shouted, holding up a bottle.

Metra froze in his tracks, and my spell was ready!

"Fire Ball!"

K-boom! The blast blew away the men emerging from one of the side doors. Normally, using such flashy magic indoors would risk getting caught in the blast, but a hall this size was safe enough. The shockwave rattled the hall but subsided quickly. The men remaining on the first floor scattered in a panic, realizing they couldn't take us head-on. I began to chant another spell.

"It’s a bluff."

The voice belonged to the young man standing beside Metra—the blonde.

"A bluff?" Metra asked.

The blonde man pointed at us. "That bottle. It’s not poison or explosives. It’s just a bluff to stop our movement."

He was right. Of course, I was under no obligation to tell him that. Metra seemed to catch on to the point.

"I see. If that were something dangerous, they would be caught in it as well."

"Though there is the school of thought that if we're going down, we're taking the opponent with us," Hastis added.

Ignoring her, Metra barked at the men on the first floor.

"It’s a bluff! Don't be cowards!"

However, the thought remained in the men’s heads: if it *wasn't* a bluff, they would be the first to die. Naturally, their movements remained slow. I signaled Hastis with my eyes. We shared a small nod and, simultaneously, dashed toward the open front door!

"Chase them!"

At Metra’s command, the men instinctively kicked off the floor. Before they could reach us, Hastis threw the bottle she was holding.

The men slowed down for a split second. But, of course, the empty medicine bottle simply fell and shattered on the floor. In that window of time, Hastis and I ran through the front door and into the hallway.

"It really was a bluff!"

Realizing they had been made fools of, the men grew enraged and rushed toward us all at once.

"Don't underestimate us!"

Into the crowd that had bunched up around the empty bottle, I let fly a completed spell.

"Fire Ball!"

K-boom! I wasn't sure how many were blown away. Some remained, but the enemy was now completely rattled. In this state, their numbers weren't an issue. Our role was to crush the main force while making them think we were just buying time for the four who went ahead to find the medicine.

"What are you doing!? Damn it! Moreld! Flask!"

Metra’s voice boomed from above. We couldn't see him from the hallway, but I could hear footsteps overhead. They were moving to the right, likely heading for the stairs. Coming this way! So that blonde man really was Flask!

Desperate not to be labeled useless before their master arrived, the remaining men on the first floor let out desperate roars and charged at us. However, that only resulted in their strength being split up.

The first man to attack swung his club, but it clumsily hit the door frame and stopped. With his stomach wide open, Hastis’s stirring rod touched him.

As if it were some kind of joke, the man’s body did a full horizontal rotation in mid-air before slamming into the floor. Another man coming from behind tripped over the fallen body, and as he landed face-down, my foot came down on the back of his head, knocking him out.

To avoid getting tripped up by the fallen men, Hastis and I backed away. I drew the short sword from my waist, and the glint of the silver blade slowed the men’s movements.

"Get out of the way!"

At Metra’s voice, the men parted to the left and right. Standing directly in front of us were the three who had come down—including the middle-aged sorcerer. He unleashed an attack spell he had evidently prepared.

"Freeze Arrow!"

But we had already expected that. I had already finished chanting my next spell.

"Magic Wind!"

It was a simple spell to create a strong gust of wind, but it was enough to push back the sorcerer’s cold arrows. The scattered ice exploded back toward the enemy, freezing one of them solid. That person happened to be the middle-aged sorcerer himself.

"Argh! Useless!"

I could understand Metra’s frustration. Without missing a beat, I tried to chant my next spell—but then, a presence appeared behind us. I whirled around to see a single, battered man I didn't recognize. He was probably a guard who had been thrashed by our team.

"M-Master Metra..."

The man raised his voice, wobbling. He didn't seem to realize Hastis and I were enemies.

"The... the four men in white... they took the medicine and—"

"What!?"

Everyone except the messenger cried out in shock. Wait a minute! This wasn't the plan!

"Why are you guys surprised too!?" Metra snapped.

I turned toward Metra and his group, sheathing my short sword.

"You might not believe this, but... it looks like my companions betrayed me and ran off!"

And so, this strange group of enemies and allies began a pursuit of the traitors who had made off with the magic medicine.

It didn't turn into much of a chase. This was Metra's mansion, after all. The advantage of terrain belonged to us—or rather, to Metra, who was currently in a truce with us.

Once we stepped out of the back exit, we found ourselves in a wide backyard. There was a garden and various plants, and beyond that was the high wall surrounding the property and an iron back gate with no way to climb it.

"The key to the gate is inside the house," Metra called out.

The four men who had been pacing frantically in front of the gate flinched and turned toward us. They wore white robes with patterns on the hoods. The bundles of cloth they each held in one arm were likely the magic medicines they had swiped from the basement, wrapped up in torn curtains or something similar.

The task force members—no, the *former* task force members—turned toward us with the eyes of cornered beasts. It seemed they had stolen the drugs and run, only to realize they couldn't get through the locked back gate.

"How could you do this!?" Hastis cried out in a pained voice.

Former Member Number One stammered, "N-No, this is... we have to protect the medicine. We were worried the bottles would break if we got caught in the fight..."

"Forget it. Let's just tell them the truth."

Former Member Number Two cut him off. He directed a provocative gaze toward us—or rather, toward Hastis.

"We joined the Sorcerer’s Association because we wanted to be sorcerers! Not to put our lives on the line to recover medicine that isn't even ours! If you want to play hero of justice, leave it to the people who actually enjoy that stuff!"

Well, it was a reasonable opinion.

"Think about it! Even if we work our lives away like this and risk our necks for a measly salary—" Former Member Number Two pointed to the bundle in his arms. "It wouldn't add up to even a fraction of what the contents of this are worth!"

Again, he was technically right. Metra, standing next to me, clicked his tongue and muttered, "Blinded by greed..."

You're one to talk, I thought.

"Even so, that's no reason to run off with the medicine!" Hastis's voice rang out with dignity.

She was right. Just because what the former members said wasn't necessarily wrong didn't mean it justified stealing the drugs.

"If you said you did it because you wanted to smell the medicine or gaze at its beauty, I might still have some room for sympathy!"

"No, I wouldn't," I muttered.

Former Member Number One hurriedly said, "It was a momentary lapse! I saw the medicine lined up and thought about how much it would be worth, and I just...!"

But Hastis quietly leveled her stirring rod.

"Since you have no love for medicine, there's no guarantee you won't have another 'lapse' in the future! It's a shame, but... equal punishment to all who harm the medicine!"

"Damn it! If it's come to this, we have no choice but to fight!"

Realizing that neither excuses nor persuasion would work against a woman overflowing with love for pharmaceuticals but lacking a shred of love for humanity, Former Member Number Two raised his voice.

They had made up their minds. The former members drew iron bars from behind their waists with their free right hands and leveled them at us. It was the moment of parting.

"Be careful not to break the medicine. Attack!"

At Metra’s command, his five subordinates were the first to jump forward! Their weapons were clubs—similar to what the former members had. Perhaps trying to make up for being handled so easily by Hastis and me earlier, they charged in recklessly!

In terms of numbers, it was five against four—an advantage! However!

The moment they tried to strike, the former members thrust the bundles of cloth in their left hands forward. Fearing they might break the medicine inside, the subordinates' movements faltered for an instant. In that gap—*crack, snap, thud!*

They were taken out in an instant.

Metra fell into a disgruntled silence for a moment before saying, "Flask. Help them."

"I am a mere thief. But it is also a fact that I owe you a debt. If you tell me to fight, I shall fight."

As he spoke, he pulled back his hood with his hand, and wavy golden hair spilled out into the sunlight. Before I knew it, he was gripping short iron bars in both hands. Metra looked toward us as well.

"That goes for you two as well. I don't suppose you plan to just be spectators. The quota is one person each."

"I know," I replied.

I drew my short sword and began to chant a spell. If our numbers dropped below theirs, they would surely escape if they scattered. Metra likely included himself in the headcount for that very reason.

Meaningless or not, there was a point in holding them back. Without a care for the cloth the man thrust forward, Hastis drove her stirring rod right into it!

"Guaargh!?"

The man let out a groan of agony and released his left hand from the bundle, his fingers contorting in an unnatural spasm.

I could only imagine what happened, but I suspected that the "stirring power" generated by Hastis's rod had passed through the cloth to stir not just the chemicals, but the very blood flow in the hand holding them.

"Here."

With a flick of his wrist, a bundle of cloth appeared in Metra's hand; I hadn't even seen him take it. Turning toward the man who had just taken down Flask, Metra carelessly tossed the bundle into the air.

The moment the man reflexively reached out to catch it—*wham!* Metra's leg extended like a rising cobra, his kick slamming squarely into the man's face.

This old guy is strong!

If he hadn't been so focused on magic and villainy and had taken up martial arts instead, he probably could have made quite a name for himself.

From the right, it was Hastis, me, Metra, and Flask. The four of us stood in a row and stepped toward the former subordinates. At first, we moved slowly, then gradually accelerated until the two groups of four collided!

In the next instant, Flask went down.

Weak! He's incredibly weak for someone who was acting so cool!

I swung my short sword high with my right hand. The member I was facing, Number Two, gave a mocking smirk and thrust his bundle of medicine forward as a shield.

However, the world isn't so soft that the same trick works forever! I swung my right hand down regardless. But the sword wasn't there! I had let go of it mid-swing, letting it fall behind my back. With my now-empty right hand, I used the momentum to snatch the bundle right out of the man's grasp!

The former member turned pale and fainted on the spot without even making a sound.

Kikikiki-ing!

"Gya!!"

While he stood there stunned after losing his shield, my foot caught him right under the chin. Beside me, the former member who had lunged at Metra with an iron bar found his arm seized; Metra used the man's own momentum to flip him through the air.

Medicine in a bottle might be fine even if stirred, but the human body doesn't take well to having its blood flow scrambled. Hastis stepped in, catching a falling bundle in her left hand while driving her stirring rod into her opponent's torso in one fluid motion.

Well, once I realized he was strong, I didn't hesitate.

"Freeze Arrow!"

I unleashed the spell I had been chanting directly at Metra's back. It was a surprise attack from behind at point-blank range. Even he couldn't dodge that. Metra's back froze solid, and he toppled over backward just as the man he had kicked hit the ground with two bundles.

"...Um... Lina? I think that was a bit... questionable, as a human being..."

Facing Hastis's disappointed look, I gave her an exasperated shrug.

"What are you talking about? The truce was only until we stopped those four from running off with the drugs. Since the fourth one is down, the truce is over, right?"

"But... from behind, at a time like this..."

"I saw an opening," I replied.

If I had fought Metra fairly, we might have struggled if his subordinates or the former task force members regained consciousness. Finishing it right then was the best move. I decided to skip the long explanation because it was a pain.

"The most important thing is the safety of the medicine, right?"

"Well, yes, but... I feel like we've had this conversation before."

"Have we? Anyway, the priority now is collecting everything before anyone wakes up and starts moving."

The main street of Perrier. This was where Hastis and I parted ways.

Among the medicine, there were items that were identical to the ones stolen from Hastis's home by the bandits. This confirmed Metra's involvement. Hastis recovered the magic medicine she was supposed to collect, and I received my reward.

By the way, it turned out that man named Flask really was the one who had stolen from Hastis's house. According to his own statement during the official interrogation, he had successfully stolen several magic medicines and was so giddy with joy that he skipped down the road, tripped, and smashed every single bottle.

After losing the drugs and wandering aimlessly in depression, he had been taken in by Metra. It was quite a twist of fate. As for Hastis, she seemed incredibly unsatisfied that her fated rival had been taken down so easily by a former subordinate, but there wasn't much I could do about that.

After everything was settled, a few days passed, and it was time to say goodbye.

"Thanks to you, the Magic Pharmaceutical Special Investigation Task Force's first mission was a success."

We shook hands at the edge of the busy street.

"It's still a tiny organization, but I intend to build it up somehow."

"Right. Good luck."

We exchanged short words of encouragement. She gave a small nod, and we let go of each other's hands. As I watched her walk away, I couldn't help but think... isn't the future of an organization where four out of five members betrayed the leader on the first mission looking a little dark?

(The Guardians of the Pharmaceuticals:End)

Afterword

L: Happy New Year! The kadomatsu[2] sure are...

Author: Don't start the year with that! Well, it’s not even really New Year's anymore. Anyway, here is *Slayers Special* Volume 28, *Potion Scramble*!

L: And now for the annual New Year's card announcement!

Author: Roger! This year's card features "Little L: Lion Dance Version, doing a New Year's part-time job for pocket money!"

L: Though it feels more like I'm taking a break or preparing rather than actually dancing.

Author: By the way, if you put the lion head on your face, your blonde hair acts as the mane.

L: Oh! You're right! Though I have doubts about a long-haired mane.

Author: But you don't really see lion dances anywhere but on TV these days.

L: I actually kind of like the smell of hospital and dentist waiting rooms. People tell me it's weird, though.

Author: I'd like to object to being treated like a chemical maniac, but... I do love the smell of rubbing alcohol. I even have my own bottle of anhydrous ethanol from the pharmacy in my room.

L: That sounds... less "weird" and more "dangerous."

Author: What are you saying! Speaking of dangerous, the English translations of *Slayers* spells are much more on the edge!

L: Spell translations? What about them?

Author: Back when the *Slayers* media mix was in full swing, the editorial department sent a fax. They wanted me to check the English spelling for some related

[2] A new years decoration placed in pairs in front of homes or buildings to welcome ancestral spirits or the gods of the harvest.

merchandise. I looked at it and saw Dragon Slave was spelled "DRAG SLAVE." If there was a typo and just one letter was different, it would be "Drug Slave"!

L: Well, the "Slave" part isn't very peaceful either... If it stayed like that, it would mean a "pulled slave," which makes no sense but is barely safe.

Author: You fixed it, right!? The "Slay" in Dragon Slave is the same as in *Slayers*, so you had to change the spelling.

Author: Hahaha. Of course I checked it. But in the end, it turned out fine.

L: Seriously. The fact that things got that close to the edge is the fault of the author who made up spell names without thinking deeply!

Author: That was for the first long novel, the Fantasia Prize entry! At that point, I didn't even know if I would debut. Normally, you don't name things while hallucinating about "what if this becomes a huge hit, gets mixed media, and needs English notation?"

L: You might have excuses, but the author's responsibility is the author's responsibility. I'd like to ask for a sincere response here.

Author: A... sincere response?

L: Specifically, a human experiment?

Author: Wait a second! What kind of sincerity is that! Also, what on earth is that murky tea-colored liquid in that cup?

L: A mysterious chemical extracted from a sandwich I bought at a convenience store half a month ago and some beef that turned crispy in the back of the fridge. Here. You like chemicals, right?

Author: The person who made it called it a mystery! It's a mystery if it can even be called a chemical!

L: It's fine. For the development of medicine, experiments on the human body are structurally indispensable. Among the great figures of history, there are those who left behind moving anecdotes of self-sacrifice, using themselves or their families as test subjects. Thinking of it that way, my stance on using the author as a test subject is becoming quite moving!

Author: No it's not! Those people are remembered for moving stories because they succeeded! If they had failed, they'd probably be treated as mad scientists!

L: Fine, fine. Since you're complaining that much, I'll let you choose which one you prefer. Oral consumption or intravenous injection?

Author: Is it "Blue Juice" (Aojiru[3])?

L: That's right! Just think of it as Aojiru!

Author: Oral! If it's this, I feel like I might survive if I'm lucky! *Gulp, gulp, gulp.*

L: When people are forced to choose between two options, their scope of thought narrows, and even if both are wrong, they end up picking one.

Author: (Turning purple and stopping moving)

L: Well then, see you all next time! Everyone, be careful not to be tricked.

[3] **Aojiru** (青汁) is a Japanese vegetable drink that is drank for its “health benefits”. Its notoriously bitter, "grassy" taste leads to it being often consumed as punishment for failing challenge games.